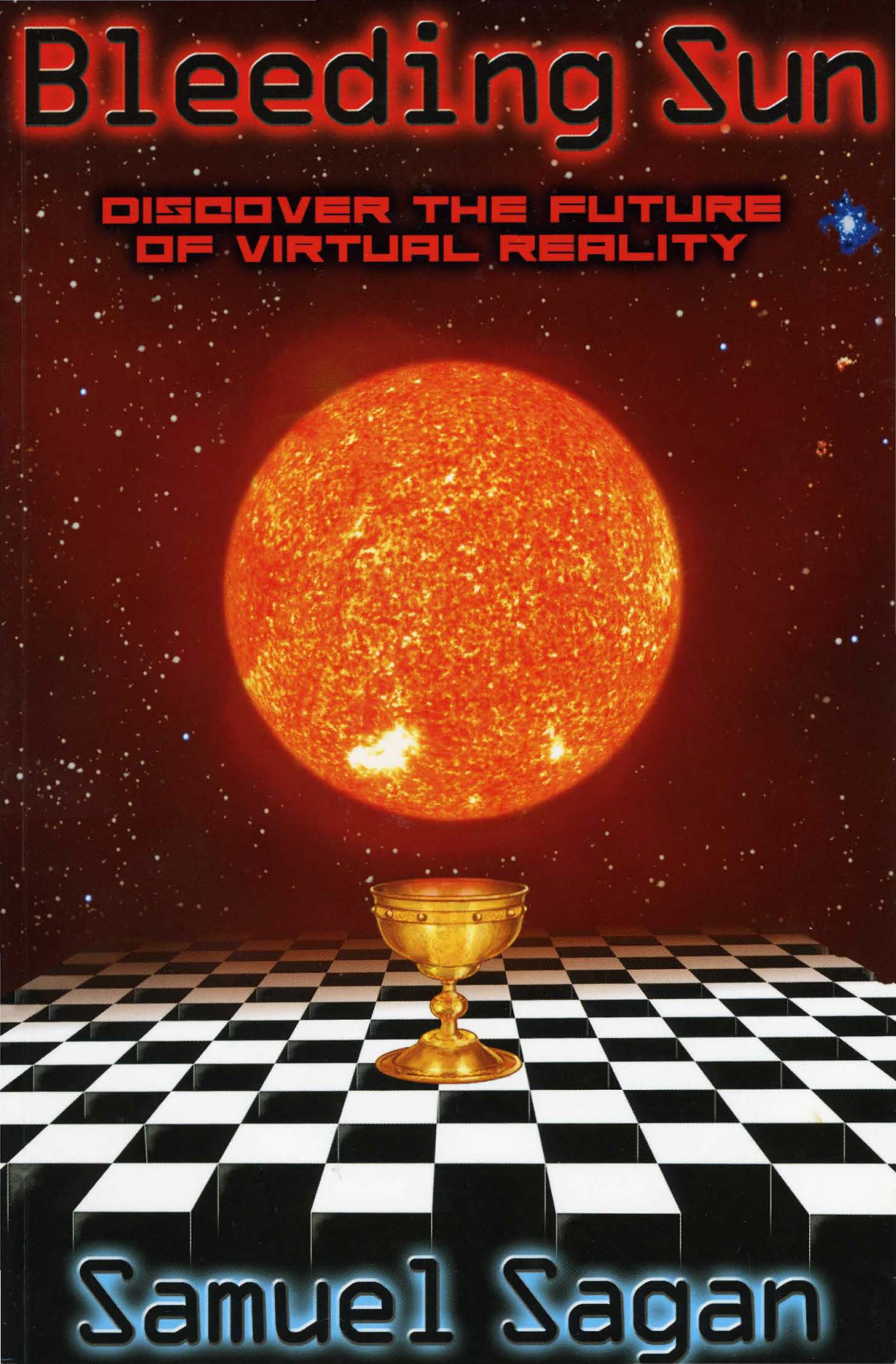
Bleeding Sun

DISCOVER THE FUTURE OF VIRTUAL REALITY



Samuel Sagan

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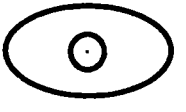

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Editor: Philip Joseph

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***Bleeding Sun*, like *Atlantean Secrets*, was created as music before it was written.**

Characters have their own themes. A number of scenes have their own sound track.

The music can be heard at the Clairvision Website:

www.clairvision.org

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> For then there will be great affliction, such as there never has been since the beginning of the world, nor ever will be again.
>
> Matthew 24:21

1.1 The rebel

Sitting on the shore of his lake, Bobby was enjoying the friendly landscape of rolling hills covered in pine forests when his mother turned up in her black spherical limo. She couldn't be bothered walking the dirt path to the lake, so she transported herself to his side.

"Hi Mum!" he stayed where he was, holding his fishing rod.

She shouted, "Hello, Phaedrus!" She never spoke, always shouted.

"Mum, Mum! Told you a thousand times, I want to be called Bobby!"

"Darling, darling! You know you'll *always* be Phaedrus to me." The gorgeous slender blonde woman paraded in front of Bobby. "Do you like my dress?" She wore one of those hypergarments that became transparent when you looked intensely.

"Beautiful!" he looked sideways. He had always hated the way she dressed. Not to talk of her perfume that smelt like biological warfare. "You always look like you're on your way to a party."

"But I am!" she shouted louder. She came to sit by his side and kissed him, a bit too close to his lips. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, not much. Just fishing."

"Caught anything exciting?"

"A few fish," he pointed to a small basket.

She pulled a face, visibly unimpressed. "Listen, darling, I've come to talk to you."

That sounded like trouble. "Mm?"

Noxious perfume smells were released from her armpit as she put her arm around his shoulder, "I received your last school report. It's not good."

"Ah?" Bobby passed his hand through his long blond hair, watching ripples on the silvery-green surface of the lake. "What's it say?"

"It says... it says you're lacking imagination. You always live in the same place, and you don't put much effort into making it beautiful."

"But Mom, this is a beautiful place!" he protested.

She looked around. "Don't you find it a bit... ordinary?"

"But I *like* it here, Mom! Who wants to live on a crappy satellite, or in a cave at the bottom of the ocean?"

"And what about... this?" his mother said with a touch of contempt, pointing at the small quadrangular log cabin on the edge of the pine forest. "What does it look like inside?"

"I never go inside. I sleep on the veranda."

"I see. How about we make it a little more interesting?"

"But I like my cabin!" he protested. "I don't feel like living in a five-hundred-room palace like you. I don't need no slaves."

"All right, all right!" she sighed. "But... there is more. The report says the Omnipresent Network is worried about your health."

"But what have I done?" he whinged.

"The report says you have a pathological tendency to avoid violent situations. Is it true that in the last year you haven't stolen anything, and you only killed six people, three of whom by accident?"

"Well... maybe. And so what if I don't like killing people?"

"But violence is *good* for you, Phaedrus!" she tried to reason with him. "Without nurturing your killer instinct, how can you keep your neurohormonal balance in good shape?"

"But... isn't fishing violent enough?" he tried to argue. "It kills the fish, you know. And then I eat them."

"Oh, for the Almighty Network Administrator's sake, can't you indulge in something more cannibalistic from time to time?" her eyes lit up with a disturbing reddish glow. "And what about sex? The report says that for a thirteen year old young man, you're completely inhibited."

"I'm not inhibited, I can't find someone who turns me on – it's different!"

"Well look, *I* brought you someone!" she pointed to the black limo. She called, "Blanca!"

A dark-haired girl dressed in a simple purple dress came out, smiling at Bobby. Kind of pretty? Hard to say from a distance. "The Omnipresent Network selected her for you." His mother gratified him with a greedy smile, "She's your perfect neurohormonal match!"

"Take her back! I don't want her!" he rebelled.

"Ah, you're impossible!" She stood up to scream at him better, "This time my patience has come to its limits. I'm *not* taking this girl back! If you don't want her, kill her! If you send her back," she threatened, "I'll call the inspectors of the Omnipresent Network!" She turned her back on him, transported herself into the limo, and went.

"Ah shit! Shit! What am I going to do, now?" he contemplated the girl who was standing in the meadow, waiting for him. He still couldn't see exactly what she looked like. He didn't care. "You stay there for the moment!" he yelled at her, and he went for a walk, following the edge of his lake.

"A few breast-strokes, that's what I need!" He dropped his clothes and jumped into the water.

When he reached the middle of the lake, a large rainbow trout smiled at him. "Hello Bobby!"

"Hi, Maxim."

"I see you've just seen your mother."

Still swimming, Bobby spat water out of his mouth.

The trout followed him. "Need some help?"

"What d'you suggest I do with the girl?"

"Find her pretty?"

"Dunno."

"Get her to swim with you," Maxim suggested. "Like a fish. It's about time you started swimming like us, instead of your sempiternal breast-strokes."

"Listen, Maxim, if there's one thing I do not need today, it's a lesson in Virtual Reality! You know I'm not interested in your tricks."

"Hey, stop!" Maxim protested. "I've come to help, not to be abused! Now for your girl... just get her to bleed a little, and throw her into the water. We'll do the rest."

"And what if she defends herself?"

"Ask Sigfr!d to give you a hand!"

"That's an idea!" Bobby flicked himself dry and dressed, and transported himself to a gigantic hall with laserworks on the ceiling. A red slave with exaggeratedly broad shoulders came towards him.

"What can I do for you, sir?" his voice was ridiculous, like a five-year-old chick.

"Huh... Sigfr!d here?" Bobby contemplated the empty hall, wondering where the dinosaurs were.

The slave turned blue and took on an excessively low-pitched voice, "No sir. Sigfr!d has moved out of this palace."

Not a great surprise, considering how much he and M&thilda had been fighting over the last few weeks.

"Do you know where Sigfr!d's landed?"

The slave turned green, "No sir. You will have to ask GOD."

"Huh... right. Well, send my regards to M&thilda."

"I won't, sir. M&thilda thinks you are a pathetic little fuckwit – the worst imbecile of this entire virtual community."

"Thanks for your help," Bobby smiled politely. Turning to GOD, he mind-dialled, "Sigfr!d."

The Generic Omnipresent Directory transported Bobby into a cave filled with dark smoke and lit with red flames. On that day cousin Sigfr!d had made his skin black. He was naked, wearing only a large pair of horns and a hairy animal skin on his back.

"Hi, Bobby!" Sigfr!d's broad, friendly smile showed two rows of extra-long white teeth. "Have you heard the news about Jasper?"

"No, what?" Bobby waved the thick smoke off his face.

Another naked black man with horns appeared in a corner of the cave. "I passed the test!" he declared triumphantly. "I'm gonna have an EECLA!"

"A what?"

"A level-three organ replacement: Ears-Eyes-Cerebellum, plus Legs and Arms."

"Meaning he can become a truck driver!" Sigfr!d exclaimed with undisguised admiration.

"Wahoo, man!" Bobby looked up at Jasper and clapped his hands.

"What about you, Bobby, did you receive your report?"

"Haven't seen it yet. I wish I understood what I'm doing wrong!" he sighed. "Three hyper-months ago, I got a notification from the Network informing me that I had failed *all* the tests for organ replacements."

"*All* of them?" Bobby's cousin chuckled.

"Apart from the legal minimum requirements for neurohormonal maintenance," Bobby nodded. "They say they'll have to change my pancreas soon, but they'll do it out of human charity, not because of my merits."

Sigfr!d kept chuckling.

"But you know, the recipe for success is simple!" Jasper spoke with the casual voice of a man fully in control of his virtuality, "Just live in a nice place, have lots of fun, and select your hyper-tours with a bit of taste."

"Maybe that's what I'm doing wrong. I haven't been on many hyper-tours lately. D'you know any good ones?"

"Oh... yeah, of course! What sorts of things d'you like? Kinky?"

"Hum... yes, at times. I'll tell you something I *really* liked," Bobby passed his hand through his long blond hair. "It was a hyper-cruise on the Nile. That was great! I loved the ruins."

"Tss, tss!" Jasper shook his head in reprobation. "Hyperarchaeology is not at all well regarded by the inspectors of the Omnipresent Network. If you want to succeed, Bobby, you must look to the future, not to the past! I'll tell you a fantastic tour: Hyper Future Six-Six-Seven!"

"Have you done it?" Bobby asked his cousin.

"Completely mad!" Sigfr!d nodded, his eyes blinking fast. "Disintegrating!"

"The future of Hyper Reality, seen by the top level wizards of the Omnipresent Network," Jasper announced.

"It begins with a huge P-bomb explosion that burns out the Sun and turns it virtual!" Sigfr!d kept blinking.

A naked black woman with huge breasts erupted in the cave. "I hear there's some electronirvan going on here?"

"John!" Sigfr!d gave her a friendly smile. "Welcome to hell! Help yourself to a pair of horns!"

"Here is our hero! Congratulations!" the woman passionately kissed Jasper on the mouth.

"Thanks John, thanks!" Jasper replied when he could extract himself from the embrace.

"Out of how many applications did you get selected for the job?"

"Oh...nine hundred thousand or so," Jasper answered in his cool voice.

"Uhu! It must give big benefits! You're going to become one of the hyper-rich!"

"You bet! First-class hyper-tours, a few rules eased out of daily Hyper Reality, nothing to worry about with Network inspectors, electronirvan in plenty... the good life!"

"Is it a demanding job?"

"You bet!" Jasper nodded. "I'll have to follow an ongoing mind control training."

"And where will you be driving your ass?"

"I'll probably start with a simple intercontinental path and work my way slowly to the Moon-Earth hyper-way."

"What's this white man doing here?" John asked with contempt, finally noticing Bobby's presence. "Didn't he know he was supposed to come black?"

"No, we hadn't invited him. He just happened to hyper-pop by," Sigfr!d winked at John. Turning towards Bobby, he added, "But that's okay, you can stay. Look what we have here!" he pointed to a blue flame in a corner of the cave – so bright it could be seen through the thick layers of dark smoke. "Want some? It's Jasper's shout."

"Thanks, men!" Bobby declined. "I've got some tough work waiting for me at home. If I nirvan now, I'll never get by. Actually, I had come to ask you a favour. I've got to get rid of a girl. It's an assignment from the Network."

"If it's an assignment, then she'll probably defend herself," Jasper foresaw.

"That's what worries me!" Bobby scratched his head.

"Now is not the hyper-time for assignments!" John scorned. "We're celebrating." He rushed to the blue flame and thrust his hand into it. "Aaaaah!" he exhaled loudly, already shivering with the first waves of endorphinic bliss.

"Yeah, why don't you come back later, Bobby?" Sigfr!d was starting to be worried the unexpected guest would spoil the party.

Bobby didn't insist. He transported himself back home.

There he found himself face to face with three men in white. On their foreheads, the hyper-emblem of the Omnipresent Network's health officers.

"Phaedrus?" the smallest of the three called in a warm, friendly voice.

"Yes, sir."

"We have received a communication from the Omnipresent Network informing us that you were about to feel a wave of unintentional sadness."

"I see. Well, thanks for the warning, sir. I'll do my best to avoid it." Bobby answered. But as he was about to walk away the man ordered, "Wait, Phaedrus! The wave could reach as low as minus 4 on the depression scale. Here is something that will negate the problem," he handed him a small red ball of light.

Bobby didn't take the redball. "I'll be all right, sir. Thanks."

"Don't be silly Phaedrus! Why create an ordeal for yourself?"

"These redballs make me feel funny. I prefer to be sad."

"Phaedrus!" the man shook his head in reprobation. "As long as you don't reach minus 2.5 on the depression scale, it would be against the law for me to compel you into medication. But do you realise how irresponsible your attitude

is? Do you realise the *appalling* social repercussions of someone's hyper-behaviour when under the influence of unintentional sadness?"

Bobby closed his eyes, looking for a way out. "Suppose I were to be violent, do you think it would help me?" he asked.

"Active violence is always an excellent way of boosting a WONEI."

"A what?"

"WONEI: Weakness-Oriented Neurohormonal Imbalance," the health officer patiently explained.

"WONEI... is it what the Omnipresent Network says I've got?"

"You also have a chronic tendency to PDHR, Pathological Drift from Hyper Reality, which is a far more serious disorder. But for now it's your WONEI that's causing the problem."

"I see," Bobby opened his eyes and declared in a firm voice, "Well in that case, officer, I think you should stuff this redball up your ass! And get out of my reality! I've got someone to kill," he pointed to the girl who was still patiently waiting in the meadow, "and it's *none* of your business!"

The three officers sighed with relief.

"Good, Phaedrus! *Very* good!" the small man wholeheartedly congratulated him. "Is there something else you want to tell me?"

"I give you five seconds to piss off. And don't you dare come back to my reality without an authorised mandate from the Omnipresent Network!"

They left, very much reassured.

Turning towards the girl, Bobby yelled, "You stay where you are and wait!"

Blanca nodded with a tender smile.

"So *that's* my perfect neurohormonal match? Doesn't say much about me!" he mumbled to himself as he was walking to the shore of his lake. "I wonder if she's got all the same diseases."

He saw a tall man standing by the water. He was wearing a weird brown gown with a hood.

Rendered bold by his victory against the health department, Phaedrus ran towards him, "Hey, man! D'you feel like a quick murder? A pretty girl. You get her for free!"

The man took off his hood and looked at him, slightly disconcerted.

As soon as he saw the man's eyes, Bobby stopped, perplexed, "Do I know you?"

The man nodded.

"But where did I meet you?" Bobby frowned, trying to remember in which prog he had seen the square face with the thick, bushy eyebrows and the short beard.

"You have never seen me. But you have felt my presence. Many times," the man said.

What a nice voice! A really special voice.

"Presence?" Bobby didn't understand. He felt strange. He didn't know what to say.

"Sit down!" the man ordered in a tone that didn't leave any space for discussion.

"I bet he doesn't have WONEI!" Bobby thought while sitting down.

The man sat on the grass in front of him. Was he an inspector of the Omnipresent Network? He didn't have any official hyper-signs on his forehead. But it could have been a disguise.

"What do you want?" Bobby asked.

The man looked deep into his eyes. "Do you know what destiny is, Bobby?"

Bobby had never seen eyes like this. And yet...

"Yes. It's what the Omnipresent Network has planned for you according to your neuro-circuits, so as to allow you to reach the highest possible degree of neurohormonal balance," Bobby recited, just in case the man was an inspector.

"Mm..." the man twirled his beard. "And do you believe that destiny can be changed?"

"If you modify your neurohormonal balance, then the Omnipresent Network will modify your destiny accordingly. And of course if you get brain-structure replacements your neuro-circuits are altered, and the Omnipresent Network can reprogram a brand new destiny for you."

"Do you think your destiny could be changed, Bobby?"

"Probably not much!" Bobby pulled a face. "I've failed all the tests. And I've got diseases: WONEI and PDHR. But see that girl over there? If I could do something really terrible to her, it would look good on my next school report. Could you help?"

"Yes, I have come to help. But not like this."

"Listen, I *have* to do something to that girl, otherwise I'll have the techs of the Omnipresent Network on my back – big trouble!"

"Bobby, you already *are* in big trouble. Do you understand what PDHR is?"

"Not quite. WONEI, I'm starting to get the picture. But PDHR..."

"PDHR means that the compelling influence of the Omnipresent Network is not working on you."

"What?"

"The Network is trying to mould you in a certain way, to make you fit within the accepted models of Hyper-Earth Link, but it is not being successful. You are resisting with remarkable endurance."

"But that's terrible!" Bobby was horrified. "Why am I doing that?"

The man didn't answer. He just looked deep into him.

It made Bobby feel strange. Not like the redballs, though.

"Are you going to help me become a good citizen of Hyper-Earth Link?"

"No, Bobby. I am going to take you out of here."

"Change my home?" Bobby frowned. "Into what?"

"No, not just modify your hyper-landscape. Take you out of Hyper-Earth Link altogether."

That was plainly inconceivable. "You're not going to tell me you're some kind of magard or maruder, are you?"

The man nodded silently.

Speaking to a machine-intruder was one of the most illegal things one could do in Hyper-Earth Link. "Shit!" Bobby laughed. "Now, *that's* going to look good in my next school report!"

"No more reports from the Network, Bobby," the man shook his head slowly. "A completely new life, in the *real* world."

The distinction between Hyper Reality and Real Reality had never been completely clear to Bobby. Anyhow, there was a weak link in the man's story. "Listen, you *can't* be a maruder! If you were one, the Omnipresent Network would already have detected something going very wrong in my mind, and it would have sent the Special Brigade."

"Your mind has been temporarily disconnected," the man declared with calm assurance. "The network is being fooled. It believes that you are swimming in the lake."

"One can't fool the Omnipresent Network!" Bobby scorned, fighting to keep his WONEI at bay. "This *must* be an adventure hyper-tour!"

"Bobby!" the man raised his voice. "In four minutes, two of my agents will break into your coffin, disconnect you from Hyper-Earth Link, and take you to a clandestine cargo ship. I have come to warn you, because it's going to hurt. You have never seen your real body, or that of your mother, or the filthy pit in which you have been kept in semi-hibernation ever since you were born. If you want to survive, you are going to have to trust me!"

"Trust?" In the virtual world of Hyper-Earth Link, asking someone to trust was a joke at best, and more usually an insult.

The man placed the palm of his right hand on Bobby's forehead.

The lake disappeared.

1.2 The scream of the billions of souls chained by the beast

Bobby finds himself lying on the floor.

A large hall. Dim light. High circular dome.

The silvery light of a starry night sky peering through the dome.

The man in the brown gown, kneeling by his side.

Bobby screams. A loud scream of despair which lingers in an agonising shriek. Billions of souls chained by the beast are screaming with him.

The man takes him in his arms and rocks him gently.

"What have they done to me?" Bobby bursts into a flood of tears. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

A loving flame of Voice, "The worst part is over now."

"I feel like a pile of dirt!" Bobby sobs. "My light is nearly extinguished!"

"Trust, my friend! Trust!"

"Will I remember the Fields of Peace?"

"No."

1.3 First OOVR (out of virtual reality) experience

In total darkness, he heard a man's voice, "The stench is horrendous!"

"Now you should be able to hear me, Bobby," another man said. "Don't panic! It's perfectly normal if you can't move."

"Now, I'm activating your physical eyes," another man said. "But you don't have to open them for the moment."

An excruciatingly painful lash in his eyes. Takes his breath away.

"Ah, damn it! He's vomiting in his oral drain."

"Think of your favourite hyper-place, Bobby! What does it look like?"

Half-convulsing with pain, Bobby opened his eyes.

Blank ceiling. Grey. Half a metre above him.

"Now I'll remove the tube from your anus. You shouldn't feel anything."

Lacerating pain. His intestines ripped apart.

Pain beyond limits.

Help! Can't scream. Help! Pain!

"He's vomiting again. The neuro-control must not be working."

"Ah, shit! We're torturing him at the moment. Knock him unconscious!"

"No, no! Just give him a disconnector."

No more pain. Blank.

Grey ceiling.

Where is the lake? And the man in the brown gown? Who is he?

"We're going to lift you up, Bobby. Might be wise to close your eyes."

The ceiling moves.

"Home!" Bobby tries to mind-dial. GOD isn't responding.

Horror!

The woman lying by his side. Horror!

"Let him see his mother!"

No! She *can't* be my mother!

Fat. Ugly. Naked. Tubes in her ears, her mouth, her nostrils, her anus, her vagina. A large drain dug into her liver, another at the bottom of her stomach. Dozens of electrodes planted into her muscles. Her hands and feet strapped. Her face hidden under a filthy mass of hair.

"Let's go!"

"Wait!"

A man dressed in black. Can't see his face. His hand gently pushes the hair off the woman's face.

The woman's face! Soft? No, no, ugly!

No. Soft.

"Let him see the coffin. It's essential for the process."

The walls move.

"This is where your body was kept, Bobby."

Horror!

Some kind of drawer, large enough to fit two bodies.

The men are pulling the drawer. While they're unplugging the electrodes from his body, Bobby catches glimpses of a wall. At least two hundred metres long.

His family coffin is one of hundreds of thousands of identical drawers.

"Now you can knock him out."

1.4 Real world

Hell.

He had gone from Hyper Reality to real hell.

Stuck in a transmission coffin. The normal sized cabin on a fifth-class cargo ship. "You have two advantages, kid," the steward said, "you can't move your body, and you're used to having drains in your mouth and your ass. Normal passengers go through tough times in these coffins."

But pain. Not like the stimulating pain one felt in Hyper-Earth Link. An ugly pain that made him feel sick. Constantly.

"It's because we need to put you in touch with your body, Bobby!" his rehabilitation instructor had explained. She was a gentle person who had the exasperating habit of waiting fifteen seconds after he spoke before answering him.

"It's because I'm VR-linking with you from Outpost 24," she said.

"What's Outpost 24?" he asked.

"A small space station, 16 million kilometres outside the orbit of Mercury. It is part of the Philadelphian network."

"I've spoken to people in space stations throughout the galaxy," Bobby told her. "Never had that problem."

Fifteen seconds later, she said, "But Outpost 24 is a *real* place!" she said.

"What's a real place?"

She tried her best to explain, "Your transmission coffin is a place. The coffin where you and your mother slept was a place."

"What about my lake and my cabin, and Mum's palace?"

"No they were not real places. They were virtual constructions of Hyper-Earth Link."

"Real places aren't very nice. Can I go back to my lake?"

"No, it's preferable if you don't. It would slow down your reconnection with reality."

"What's reality?"

"When you feel your body, and you move from place to place."

"But why are you doing that to me?" he started crying.

She tried to create a cosy virtual space, a clearing in the middle of a forest with a small running creek where furry animals were drinking.

Bobby found himself lying on the ground. "Why can't I move?"

She sat close to him. "This is Virtual Real Reality. You can only move by moving your physical body (apart from your eyes and your larynx, so as to let you see and talk)." She took his hand and moved it a tiny little bit.

He screamed with pain.

It took fifteen seconds before she let go of him, "Sorry, my friend! We're going to have to do this *very* gradually." And she began with a lengthy series of exercises where she lightly touched his body.

She said he was supposed to feel her hands. He couldn't feel anything, except when she pressed hard and it hurt. She was stubborn. She could go on for hyper-hours in one go (or whatever it was that they used to measure time sequences in VRR). He had no choice but to bear with her. She was not pretty.

She looked old, at least thirty-five. She had wrinkles on her forehead. Her name was Amy. He didn't like that name. She always wore the same green dress. She talked a lot. He understood what she said, but he couldn't see the point. Who cared if his cargo ship was immobilised? Anyhow, since he lived in VRR, what difference did it make to him? And why was she so fixed on keeping him stuck in his body, and feeling his body? She insisted it was essential to anchor him into reality. Reality! He hated reality! The pain never stopped. And reality was boring and ugly. You should have seen the 'place' in which Amy lived! The VRR scenes were shocking. Lucky she didn't have to report to the ON inspectors. She wanted to find friends for him. He said, "Thank you very much but I'm not that stupid! If I need friends, I'll create them." She said in Virtual Real Reality, one couldn't create friends, one had to find them. He asked for GOD. There didn't seem to be any such directory for the Philadelphias. Amy made him lie in boring VRR programs: totally uninventive landscapes and people who, like her, never changed their appearance. And she forced him to watch himself in a mirror at least once per VRR day – not the least of his ordeals. He discovered a small and miserably thin, ugly boy with scruffy dark hair. The idea that he might be stuck in that body forever made him feel sick. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to live elsewhere than in Hyper-Earth Link. She explained it was for the superior joy of liberty. She said that now he had become a free man. "A free man? You must be joking!" He insulted her. She didn't seem to like it. She remained stubbornly patient. VRR day after VRR day, he begged her to let him return to Hyper-Earth Link. One morning, it made her cry. Something strange was happening, Bobby wasn't sure what. She kept on and on with exercises that never seemed to lead anywhere. Bobby was starting to feel when Amy touched him – big deal! – but his hands stubbornly refused to move. She was infinitely patient. He often became exasperated. One VRR day, he became furious and screamed insults at her until she left. The next VRR morning, she didn't come back.

He missed her.

And what if she never came back?

He was lying – always lying! – on a small boat on the ocean, contemplating the sky, when he heard another boat approaching. A few seconds later, someone walked on the deck. He hoped it was her.

"Hello, Bobby. Remember me?"

It was the man in the brown gown. The maruder.

Bobby closed his eyes and played dead. He wished he could run away. If only he could have run away on that fatal day when the maruder had broken into his lake, this nightmare would never have happened.

Bobby didn't try to call for help. What was the point? If this man could marude the almighty ON, then no doubt he could fool the crappy little VRR network in which Bobby was stranded.

"You're angry at me, aren't you?" the maruder said. "I understand. I don't blame you. It's difficult to imagine how things could be worse for you than

they are now." They remained silent for a long while, listening to the floup-floup of wavelets hitting the boat.

Bobby kept his eyes closed. He *knew* that the maruder hadn't left.

"See," the man said, "now you start to understand what presence means," and he put his hand on Bobby's chest.

Utterly different from Amy's hand. Strong, like this man could never have WONE!. But strange. Very strange.

"I have come to give you a present, Bobby. Because I want to be your friend."

"I don't want your present," Bobby replied, his eyes sealed.

"The present isn't just for you, it's also for Amy. When she sees it, she'll be so happy she'll cry with joy."

That sounded interesting. But this man was a social menace! If Bobby listened to him, the Almighty Network's Administrator knows what could happen!

"I am going to show you how to move your hand, Bobby. But for this, I need your help." He didn't wait for a reply. "You are an intelligent young man, let me explain it to you. If Amy's treatment isn't working, it is because your paralysis is not just due to a deficiency in your nervous system. Your neuro-muscular system has been repaired by the medicomputer of your transmission coffin. Now the problem is on another level. So, I am going to show you how to use something extremely powerful. You can feel my hand, can't you?"

Of course, the man didn't need to wait for an answer. A maruder of his calibre could easily read his answer through the VRR's central command.

"Right," the man went on. "Now, look for a similar sensation on top of your head."

A few inches above the top of his skull, Bobby felt a little star.

"This is your Point! Today I have lit it up to help you locate it. Later on you will have to rely on the sensation."

To his surprise, Bobby *did* feel a sensation outside his head. It was weird, like the man's hand on his chest.

"Now we're going to do some magic! Imagine your right hand is a puppet, and you are handling the strings from the Point."

Bobby had no idea what a puppet was.

"All right," the man tried again, "imagine your right hand is an antique combro-fissor, and the hyper-control-box is in your Point. Now, try to move the combro-fissor."

There was a jerk.

Bobby opened his virtual eyes with real amazement.

The man was kneeling by his side. He raised his bushy eyebrows and smiled, "Now, you are going to have to practise, practise, practise... body part after body part, and always from the Point. Understood?"

"Yes!" Bobby thought. With a super-maruder like him, no need to talk.

"Now there is something I need to explain to you. It's about Amy. Real people are not like virtual people. They feel with their heart. And if you don't care for them, they get hurt."

Bobby wasn't too sure what that meant. "Does Amy have a disease, like WONEI?"

"No, she doesn't have a disease. When you yell at her, she gets sad."

"Did her neurohormonal balance get upset because of me?"

"Mm... something like that, yes. So after I go, you could perhaps give her a VRR call and say you're sorry about yesterday, or that you miss her. Tell her you have a present for her. The neurohormonal response will be immediate."

The man waited, as if he expected Bobby to say something. Then he stood up. "By the way, if you need to call *me*, don't use the VRR network, use the Point!" he smiled. And he walked back to his boat and left.

Bobby tried the combro-fissor trick a few more times. It worked like a hyper-charm! Each time, his right hand responded with a small jerk.

After deliberating, he decided to call Amy. But it was the first time he tried to initiate a VRR communication, and he had a bad surprise: the rules of hyper-call didn't work here. And of course, GOD wasn't an option.

What if Amy never came back?

He went back to combro-fissoring. Something strange happened. A woman appeared in front of him. "The person you have called is unavailable for the moment," she announced. "Please call again later, or try another destination." A polite smile, and she disappeared.

After pondering deeply for a few VRR seconds, Bobby tried something new. From his Point-hyper-control-box, he attempted a high emergency call.

It worked! Thirty seconds later, Amy's face appeared.

Her hair was all over the place. Her eyes half-opened, she looked vague. "Bobby?" she closed her eyes one second, and reopened them.

Bobby took a long virtual breath. "I am sorry about yesterday I miss you I have a present for you."

After the usual fifteen second lag, Amy's eyes opened wider. "Mm? A present? But that's wonderful, Bobby. What is it?"

From her face, it was clear that her neurohormonal balance was being upset again. Bobby preferred to shut up. Amy disappeared.

Half an hour later, a boat was heard.

Steps on the deck. Her steps.

"Hello Bobby!" Her hair was back to normal. Her neurohormones still shaky.

A small jerk in his right hand.

"Oh my God! How did you do that?" Tears in her eyes, she knelt down by his side. "How did you do that Bobby?"

Bobby didn't know what to say. Lo! in his hyper-control-box the maruder's presence was back. He spoke without words, "Better not tell her about me. It will make life simpler for you."

"What happened, Bobby?" Amy insisted.

Bobby hid behind his eyelids, hesitating. Then he looked into her eyes, "I missed you, Amy."

"I missed you too!" She started crying, moving her hand over his chest.

It felt good. Not hyper-good. Different.

1.5 HR, VRR, VR and RR

In the VRR days that followed, Bobby managed to jerk his right hand and his feet. Same principle, using the hyper-control-box. Amy was delighted with his progress. She often clapped her hands and laughed with joy. That felt good. Virtually good. Because he enjoyed seeing her laugh, he decided to practise several times every day, during the long hours of solitude. From his Point, he started working on body part after body part.

In a matter of weeks, he could twitch all parts of his legs and arms. Once or twice he even managed to twitch his entire body at once. But his efforts created strange results. The sensations in his Point became more and more intense. At times, it created weird pulsing feelings throughout his body, and especially in his chest. And each time the control-box's hyper-voltage became high, he could feel the maruder's presence.

Once he complained, "Why are you maruding me all the time?"

"I am not maruding you!" the man laughed. "*You* are maruding *me*!"

"Mm?" Bobby was suspicious. "You don't belong to this VRR network, do you?"

"No."

"So you *are* maruding! Which network do you belong to?"

"The World to Come. Super-reality."

Bobby cogitated. "I know Hyper Reality, Virtual Real Reality and Real Reality, and I've also heard of Virtual Reality free-style, but Super-Reality... is it new stuff?"

"Eternally new, Bobby. Imagine Real Reality with all the benefits of Hyper Reality, but none of the drawbacks – no ON inspectors or regulations."

That was hard to conceive. Real Reality meant being ugly and powerless, stuck in a transmission coffin. Hyper-Earth Link was the most beautiful reality ever invented.

"Would you like to come and visit my world, Bobby?"

"After what happened to me last time? No way, man!" he shouted. "I just wanna be left alone! Leave me alone! Understand?"

It worked, at last. The maruder's presence disappeared from his Point.

Later, when Amy arrived, she looked preoccupied. They started the exercises as usual, trying to get him to jerk like a mad cyborg overtaken by a magard. But after fifteen minutes, Amy signalled the end of the practice by putting her warm, friendly hand on his chest. "Bobby, we are going to run into trouble soon. The way you're progressing, it won't be long before you really can move your legs and your arms."

"And so? Isn't this what we want?"

"The problem is, your body is in the transmission coffin. You're going to hit the walls and make a mess of the tubes."

"Well, perhaps we could create a VRR that would be *exactly* like the inside of my coffin, so I could see what I'm doing and be careful."

"Listen, love," she smiled, "if it's to copy reality exactly, you don't need VRR. You can just really be in your real body!"

"I don't like that Real Reality stuff. I prefer VRR," Bobby was firm.

As soon as they VRRed a replica of his coffin, it appeared there was a tube in his mouth, two in his nostrils, one attached to his penis, another one inserted in his anus. There was also a large catheter hooked into his left jugular, and various electrodes and pieces of equipment that left little space for him to do anything more than twitch his arms and his legs.

Amy's neurohormonal balance was very upset.

Bobby promptly VRRed himself back into the garden where they had conducted the morning exercise. "When I arrive in the Philadephias, will I be given a larger coffin?"

She had tears in her eyes. "No, not a coffin, a proper cabin! I have already found one for you on Philadelphia 17, where I normally live. (Outpost 24 isn't my home. I am just on a mission here.) But your ship is immobilised outside the blockade, half way between the orbits of Mercury and Venus. Do you understand what the solar system is?"

"Of course!" Bobby had hyper-visited it many times.

"Thirty million kilometres inside the orbit of Venus, the army of the Rex has established a blockade, to isolate the Philadelphias. No ship can pass through – especially slow merchandise ships like the one where your body is kept," she spoke as if it was really terrible.

"Well, I guess I will have to be patient," he said confidently, so as not to make her neurohormonal imbalance worse.

"I have to tell you, the latest news is not good. The Rex has just sent another fourteen hundred warships to reinforce the blockade. It's just a matter of time before *all* communications are interrupted. Besides, I won't be staying much longer on Outpost 24. I must return to Philadelphia 17 – much further away from the blockade."

Bobby tried to remain calm, "Do you mean to say, your 'place' and my 'place' aren't on the same side of the blockade?"

"That's right. The Philadelphia stations are located close to Mercury's orbit."

Bobby didn't understand. "But how can they block VRR? VRR can take me anywhere, regardless of what those guys do with their Real Reality."

"Your VRR can take you anywhere, regardless of the blockade, and my VRR can take me anywhere. But for our VRRs to meet, there has to be a connection between your real place and my real place."

"So," he understood, "all the problems come from the fact that we are real people."

She smiled with immense softness, caressing his chest.

It felt good. Better than good.

Better than hyper-good?

After hesitating, he came to the conclusion, "Amy, there is something about you that I have never felt in anyone in Hyper-Earth Link."

Fifteen seconds later, it made her cry.

1.6 Heart?

Bobby had decided he wanted to hold Amy's hand before she got VRR-terminated, or whatever it was called for real people. But despite all the progress he had made over the last few weeks, he still couldn't get his hands to produce more than puny jerks.

"I *must* raise the voltage in the hyper-control-box," he kept telling himself, appalled by the weakness of his muscular contractions. After two hours of concentrated effort, a great upsurge of power took place in his Point. It resulted in a breathtaking movement – his thumb inched forward and almost touched his finger!

At once, the maruder's presence was back.

"Listen, son," the man said in his wordless way, "you can't both call me and tell me to go away at the same time. You have to make up your mind!"

"I don't want you, I just want voltage in my Point!"

"Bobby, try to understand! *I* am the source of your voltage."

Bobby hesitated, "Do you mean to say, I'm plugged into your World to Come network?"

"Mm... I guess, you can put it that way, yes."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, sir! This is a regrettable mistake, I really didn't intend to be maruding your virtual territory! I hope you won't call your Network's inspectors, because..."

"Bobby, you are welcome to marude the World to Come whenever you like. Anyhow, you are not a maruder, you are an invited guest. And you can draw as much energy as you like, provided you use it to follow your heart."

"Strange network!" Bobby Point-frowned. "What's 'following your heart'?"

"When you care for Amy, you follow your heart. Now, would you like me to show you how to increase the voltage in your Point?"

After a few seconds of deliberation, Bobby decided in favour of it. It sounded like the right tactical move, especially considering the promotional offer of free energy. "All right, man, let's get to it!"

"Bobby, this is not the way to speak to real people."

"Do you mean you're a real person like Amy?" Bobby was staggered. "Do you have neurohormonal imbalance too?"

"Oh, Lord!" the man sighed. "If Amy cries, it's not because of neurohormonal imbalance. It's because she has heart."

"Heart? I see!" Bobby fixed the name of this new condition in his memory. "Do you have it too?"

"All human beings have heart."

"No, not in Hyper-Earth Link!" Bobby defended his Network.

"Perhaps, perhaps," the man sighed. "Now, tune into your Point!" he ordered. "Right, like that! Now, become more motionless."

A strange thing to say to someone VRR-paralysed.

"Your mind is moving too much," he explained. "Like this."

The weirdest experience followed, as if everything had disappeared but Bobby's Point. It was pulsing with the man's presence. "Now, move the combro-fissor, using my presence as the voltage!"

There was a massive discharge of energy. Bobby's body started pulsing from Point to toe. The intensity built up to insane levels. Even the coffin was pulsing!

For a brief instant, his fingers and his thumb joined.

Then everything stopped, leaving him out of breath.

The man waited for a minute to let him recover. "That's plenty for today," he declared. "I'll see you later, friend. I have much work to do." And he stopped talking, but his presence remained in Bobby's Point.

Bobby was badly in need of a break. He was so out of his brain that he immersed himself in educational VRRs. He spent a long time dozing, until he was taken by surprise by Amy, who arrived much earlier than usual.

He interrupted his program, turning the landscape into a garden with lots of flowers, just like she liked them. "Good *morning*, Amy," he welcomed her in a loud, jovial voice. "How *are* you this morning?"

"What's happening to you?" she frowned, after the usual fifteen second lag.

"Did I say the wrong one?" he took on a little voice. "I'm sorry! I was watching this VRR that tells you how to behave with real people. I thought it was what I was supposed to say."

She burst out laughing, "Good *morning*, Bobby! I am *well*, thank you!" she went on, just like in the VRR. "And you?"

"I am quite well, thank you!" he said in the right voice.

She sat by his side. "And what else did the VRR tell you to say?"

"Nice weather today! And how are your parents?"

"Oh, I don't know! You see, my only relative was my mother. She died twelve years ago."

"Goo-ood, good!"

"Bobby, I appreciate the effort," she put her hand on his chest, "but this is going to require some practice. Anyhow, I have some news to tell you," she went on talking about a battle in space like the one Bobby had lost against cousin Sigfr!d three hyper-years ago, but on a much smaller scale. Only 3000 warships and probably no planets destroyed, just a few space stations here and there. It sounded rather boring. But the conclusion took Bobby completely by surprise, "It means we could be disconnected any second. After this I will leave Outpost 24, and return to Philadelphia 17."

Bobby was overwhelmed. "But Amy... I really like it when you come into my VRR! What am I going to do if you get terminated?"

"I have transferred a whole VR library for you onto the network of your ship. It will be presented to you by a virtual clone of myself. She'll give you all the instructions, according to your progress."

"But it's not going to be the real you!"

Amy's eyes shone with this softness that made her different from anyone Bobby had met before. "So you can appreciate the difference between real people and virtual ones, now," she smiled. "Tell me, how does it feel?"

"Real people, I don't know, but you, you have heart!"

"Thank you, Bobby," she was touched. "I think you have heart too!"

"Me? No, I've got WONEI."

"WONEI?"

"It's another disease. When you don't kill enough people."

"What? But Bobby... heart is not a disease, it's the most important of all things! It's what makes life worth living. Have you heard of Maitreya?"

"No, what's that?"

"Someone who lived on the Earth, a while ago. He was killed by the Rex. He spoke many wonderful verses about love. One of them was, 'He who has no love has no land, no hope, no past and no future.'"

"Is love the same as heart?" Bobby was surprised.

"What do the people of Hyper-Earth Link say about love?"

"It's when you use someone else to reach neurohormonal balance. But they don't do it with the heart, they use other organs."

"I see. When you lived in Hyper-Earth Link, did you love someone?"

"Oh... a few. It never really worked with me, probably because of my WONEI. I always ended up feeling bored, even with special assistance from the Omnipresent Network."

"And what about heart? Do you think the Hyper-Earth Link people have heart?"

"No, they're very balanced in my Network."

They remained silent for a long while. Bobby was about to ask more about the heart condition when the ground of the garden started shaking. Amy's image became blurry. He could no longer feel her hand on his chest.

"Help!" Bobby pulled a massive dose of energy from his Point, holding onto her, making his entire coffin pulsate.

Amy's image regained clarity. "...meet again, friend. In this world or in the World To Come!"

So she knew about WTC! "Are you a member of that network?"

Under Bobby, the ground kept being shaken.

Amy disappeared.

"No!" he screamed, pulling energy from the Point with all his strength.

Amy walked back into the garden.

"Piss off, you bitch! I don't want to see you."

There was no fifteen-second lag. "Hey, Bobby!" Amy said in her gentle voice, "I understand exactly how you must be feeling. Let me..."

"Get out of my reality!" Using his Point, he switched her off.

"Amy! Amy!" he desperately called. From the Point, he activated the highest level of emergency communication available on the network. A man appeared, "The area which you have called is no longer connected to this network. Please contact your information officer for more..."

Bobby shut him up. Turning up to his Point he called the master-maruder, "Help! Please! Help!"

"Sorry, Bobby, but at the moment the battle is raging. I am *extremely* busy," the man answered. "I will come to visit you as soon as I can."

1.7 Cheated by the beast

Bobby spent the whole VRR day trying to make emergency calls that invariably brought the same operator with the same stupid message. To make things worse, the network's information officer was unavailable due to system failure – the kind of thing that *never* happened in Hyper-Earth Link! When Bobby finally VR-caught hold of the officer, he was told that all communications through the blockade had been suspended indefinitely. Couldn't he marude his way through to Philadelphia 17? "Sir," the officer frowned, "this would be totally illegal, and complete folly! The surveillance systems of Hyper-Earth Link would immediately detect the virtual trespassing and take retaliatory measures against your ship, which..."

Bobby switched him off.

Despair was the next hyper-station. Now that Amy wasn't going to come back, lying on the ground felt infinitely more miserable. Her clone turned up a few times, but he refused to speak to her. Thank the Almighty Administrator Network, he had no difficulty terminating her from his Point!

As VRR hours passed, he started feeling a burning need to see Sigfr!d. He decided to call Hyper-Earth Link.

The information officer reappeared, "Sorry, sir! Your ship is not authorised to connect to Hyper-Earth Link."

Bobby switched him off and cogitated. Then he switched him back on, and reiterated the request from the Point. The officer immediately changed his attitude, "Certainly, sir! Please engage the identification procedure."

"Bobby, stop!" the man in the brown gown walked into the garden.

The information officer abruptly disappeared.

"Maruding the Omnipresent Network is a dangerous sport," the man said. You're not ready for that. You're going to bring big trouble to the ship."

"But I'm not maruding!" Bobby protested. "Hyper-Earth Link is my home! I can't be a maruder in my own network!"

"Bobby, Bobby..." the man sighed, kneeling by his side. He put his hand on his chest.

Very soft. And the pulsing was back in the coffin.

"What were you trying to do?" he asked.

"Get to GOD and talk to my cousin. His name is Sigfr!d."

Even softer. Amazingly soft.

"Perhaps, you wouldn't enjoy his company as much as you used to."

"But he's my best friend. And I'd like to talk to my Mum too."

Anxiety washed away. Incredibly peaceful. Such depth in the man's eyes.

"And what if I found people with heart for you to VR-link to?" he offered.

Bobby insisted stubbornly, "I know that Mum and Sigfr!d haven't got heart, but they're my family. I miss them! Can you help me reach through?"

The man shook his head silently.

"But for a super-maruder like you, that wouldn't be much!"

Softer even than Amy. And warm. Liquid gold.

"What if we organised for the cargo ship's VR network to play Sigfr!d and your Mum, so you can talk to them?" the man offered.

"But..." Bobby hesitated, "I don't want virtual clones. I want my real Mum!"

"When people have no heart, does it matter if they are real or cloned?"

Until Bobby had met Amy, he had never pondered much on the distinction between really real people and virtual people. No one cared about these things in Hyper-Earth Link.

But with Amy, it was different. She was so special.

Bobby suddenly wondered if Sigfr!d was a real person, like Amy.

"My mother *must* be real since I saw her, in our drawer. Not a pretty sight, but that's how things are in real reality! And Jasper is real, since he's going to be a truck driver. Sigfr!d *must* be real too. He has helped me heaps with my school work. John... I'm not sure. If you let me talk to them, I might be able to find out."

"Bobby, are you going to accept me as your friend, now?"

Bobby looked at him suspiciously. "You're a dangerous man!"

"If I hadn't taken you out of Hyper-Earth Link, you would never have met Amy. There are other friends like her waiting for you."

"No way!" Bobby raised his voice. "My friends are in Hyper-Earth Link! That is where I belong!"

The man took in a long breath. "All right Bobby. You want the Omnipresent Network? Here is the Omnipresent Network!" Using his maruder's master-skills, he established the familiar connection to GOD.

"Thanks, man! Thanks!" Bobby exulted. Maybe he was a friend after all! "Can I get back into my normal body?"

The man nodded, turning Bobby's Virtual Real Reality into plain VR. Bobby was no longer an ugly shrimp but the tall young man with the high forehead and long curly blond hair.

But Sigfr!d didn't answer.

Neither did his mother.

Nor Jasper. Nor John. Nor any of his other friend.

"Now, call yourself!" the man said.

"I'm not interested in talking to a clone of myself!"

"Call yourself!" the man ordered in a calm, WONEI-free voice.

Bobby obeyed. A health officer who bore the Network's official sign on his forehead appeared. "Phaedrus Elmian? He was terminated four years ago," he announced. "Were you a friend of his?"

An impulse from the Point compelled Bobby to answer, "Yes."

"His termination was due to a rare congenital disease, which organ replacements are powerless to combat. It was an easy, joyful termination. The funeral's hyper-festival was conducted by his mother. Would you like me to connect you to her for more information?"

"Yes."

"Time lag 4.5 minutes," the officer announced before disappearing.

"What's that mean?" Bobby asked the master maruder.

"It means that if you travelled at the speed of light, it would take you four-and-a-half minutes to reach the Earth. So after you speak, it will take nine minutes for your mother to answer," the brown-robed man answered.

Bobby didn't get it. He waited silently.

Nine minutes later, his mother appeared "What do you want?" she casually asked as if he were a stranger.

Bobby froze. Through the Point, the man in the brown gown sent another impulse which made him answer, "I'm a friend of Phaedrus. My name is Bobby."

For nine minutes of mounting anxiety, Bobby observed the woman. Same face as his mother, but a completely different feel in her eyes. Much gentler. It seemed clear she had never seen Bobby's face. This didn't make any sense.

Except of course, if...

Bobby became blank, refusing to even consider the possibility.

Finally, she answered, "Bobby? Never heard that name. Anyway, don't you know that Phaedrus was terminated four years ago! Who are you?"

"Don't you remember this name?" Bobby's world was collapsing.

The master-maruder terminated the communication. "Do you understand, now?" he asked.

Bobby closed his eyes. "Go away!"

"No. Real friends don't go away when you need them the most."

Bobby tried to Point-terminate him. It didn't work.

"Now listen, to me. Neither Sigfr!d, Jasper nor any of your friends in Hyper-Earth Link were real people. After my men abducted you, the Omnipresent Network terminated their virtual presence in Hyper-Earth Link."

"And my mother?"

"The last time you hyper-linked to her was nine years ago. Then the Network separated your realities. In your reality she was replaced by a virtual clone, and vice versa. But even before that, the woman you VR-linked to wasn't the one who you saw in your drawer. Perhaps, it didn't matter much, since you weren't born from her womb either. You were born in a test tube, and taken to her drawer in the months following the term of your maturation."

"That can't be!" he tried to defend himself. "Why did they say I died four years ago!"

"Since you were three, the Omnipresent Network had identified you as a potential rebel. It gradually isolated you from the rest of the Hyper-Earth Link community. In your mother's reality, four years ago, Bobby Elmian's clone was terminated."

"But nine years ago, when they took me away from her, didn't anyone notice anything?"

"No. No one."

"But why didn't they terminate me, then?"

"Because by keeping you alive in his world, the Rex could have done much more damage to your soul than by killing you."

1.8 Archive neurocybernetics – first subliminal glimpses

Amy had been terminated. Reality had been turned upside down. The Almighty Network Administrator had betrayed him. There was nothing left to hope for. Bobby fell sick, as indicated by an alarm signal coming from the transmission coffin's medicomputer.

The brown-robed man invited him to visit his World to Come network. Bobby accepted. When he came back he was no longer sick, but unfortunately he couldn't remember anything of the trip, except that the man's name was Barkhan Seer[1] and that his sub-network was called Archive. They often spoke together. Barkhan Seer's job was Master of Thunder. It seemed to pay even better than truck driver, judging by all the benefits he got from his network. Barkhan Seer said he could find a job for Bobby, but that Bobby would first have to become a man of heart and undergo a long training. Bobby was somehow suspicious of a job where you were to be paid later and in the World to Come, but he was not in a position to be picky. Barkhan Seer told him to discontinue all muscular exercises for fear he would damage the equipment in the coffin. He wanted him to start a normal virtual life again, moving around in VR, free from ties to his Real Reality body. Loyal to Amy, Bobby refused obstinately. Barkhan Seer forced him to watch the first of the series of VRs left by Amy, in which she said exactly the same.

After watching Amy's clone, Bobby fell sick again. It was a severe case, as shown by the flashing red light sent by the medicomputer. Barkhan Seer treated him with golden light, a virtual drug broadcast from the Archive network. It worked magic. An instant effect on his neurohormonal balance, but nothing like the redballs of Hyper-Earth Link. Rather, it felt sweet like Amy's hand on his chest. "Special stuff! Can I have more?" Bobby kept asking.

Barkhan Seer didn't seem to mind giving him strong shots of the drug, as if the risk of overdose was minimal. "When you *really* become a man of heart," he told Bobby, "you will be able to give this light to all those you love."

After much delaying, Bobby finally had to leave his Virtual Real Reality body and get up.

Even though he kept his RR appearance, it felt empty. There was something missing.

"Will I be able to go back and lie in my VRR body from time to time?" he asked as he was pacing in the VR garden.

"Excellent idea!" Barkhan Seer approved. Then he brought another man dressed in a long cape, same dark brown colour. "Bobby, this is a virtual clone of an Archive friend of mine, Szar. He will be one of your training instructors."

"Praise the Great Apollo, Bobby!" the tall man with long dark-blond hair smiled at him.

Bobby couldn't be bothered answering a virtual clone.

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[1] Pronounced Barkhan Zair.

Barkhan Seer left and Szar explained, "We're going to start with playing a few games."

Unlike Sigfr!d, Bobby had never been a game fanatic. But he hadn't been playing anything for a while, so he didn't mind.

"The first game is called Black Dance," the clone said. He started moving his arms and legs as in those boring martial arts games which Sigfr!d always won.

"I don't like hyper-karate games."

"Hunh, hunh! This is no ordinary VR game! This is an Archive training hyper-program. Here, the weapon is your Point. I move too fast for your normal mind. The only way for you to hit me is to direct your movements from your Point. Get it?" Szar threw a massive punch at Bobby's nose.

The blow was so violent that Bobby's two feet lifted off the ground. He fell flat on his back, his nose badly smashed, blood flowing from both nostrils. "I'm not sure." Bobby stood up, quickly reconstructing his broken nose and VR-erasing the blood stains. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Try to push my hand down," Szar said, presenting his flat palm to Bobby.

Pressing with both hands, Bobby was unable to move Szar's palm an inch.

"Now, try from your Point!" Szar instructed. "Same principle as when you were working on your physical body."

"You mean the combro-fissor trick?"

That was easy. Bobby directed the impulse from above his head. Instantly, Szar's hand yielded under the pressure.

"Not bad, Bobby!" Szar was impressed.

"I've just spent four weeks playing magard in the hyper-control-box!" Bobby explained.

"These were weeks well spent! Now try to punch me," Szar opened his arms, offering his solar plexus.

Bobby's first Point-punch was a success. It threw Szar onto the ground.

"You're a fast learner Bobby!" Szar complimented him. "Now you must learn the dance's movements. Copy me!" He started waving his arms. Bobby followed the gestures, sometimes slow and flowing, sometimes furiously fast. A few dozen blows were exchanged, resulting in five broken noses, two broken legs and three arms, one fractured skull (broken ribs didn't count), and plenty of blood, all equitably distributed.

"I'm bored," Bobby declared after a moment. "Can we stop?"

The clone twinged his beard. "Would you like me to increase the skill-level? Maybe you need something more challenging."

"No thanks."

"Let's try another game."

"No thanks," Bobby was resolute to remain polite because Szar was a clone of his friend's friend. "Why don't you come back later?"

Szar didn't insist. After he left, Bobby went back to lie in his Virtual Real Reality body and he waited, as when he used to wait for Amy's visit.

He knew she wasn't coming, but he didn't know what else to do.

After this, Szar came back a few times every day. They tried several games which Bobby could win only by operating from his Point: more Black Dance, Stop the Plague (a sea of virtual cockroaches that had to be arrested in order to save the world), Nephilim Scum (a strategy game where a team of brown-gowned clones, friends of Szar, fought against cannibal giants), Evil Football (the same two teams running madly after a round ball, and for what? Bobby didn't get it). Szar was friendly and patient, like Amy, but he always wanted Bobby to try his best to win the games.

"Who cares if I win? The purpose of a game is to play, not to win," Bobby tried to explain to him. "The people who are obsessed with winning end up with neuroendocrinal imbalance."

"Don't you feel joy when you realise you are improving?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"My games are boring, aren't they?" Szar smiled, looking down to his left fist.

"Oh, they're okay," Bobby had made up his mind to remain amicable.

"Bobby," Szar put his hand on his shoulder, "what you need at the moment is not supermind training. I'll tell you what you need: real people to give some meaning to your life." They went for a walk in the garden, which was full of Amy's favourite flowers. They were called white roses, as Bobby had been told by the presenter of the VRR encyclopedia Amy had left for him. Szar went on, "The problem is, there is no one we can VR-link you to. Between you and the Philadelphian stations, there's the blockade. It jams all communications. We do have friends in the Outer Planets, but the lag would be more than an hour."

"No one I could speak to on Earth?"

"Oh, no! The Earth is the domain of the VR potatoes of Hyper-Earth Link!"

"What's a VR potato?"

"Someone whose life takes place entirely in Virtual Reality, never in Real Reality."

"Like me!"

Szar bit his lip, looking into Bobby's eyes.

It was deep. Strangely deep.

Bobby frowned, "But I thought only real people had heart!"

"Thanks," Szar's clone smiled, holding the eye contact. "Bobby, I'm going to send you a *real* person – not a virtual clone. She'll explain a few things to you. Then if you want to resume your training, you can call me."

"What's her name?"

"The Black Panther."

1.9 Aphelion – the return

In his garden full of white rosebushes, Bobby was lying in his VRR body, waiting. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for, or how long he had been waiting. Who cared?

"Hello, Bobby."

He opened his eyes. A woman was walking into his garden.

"Are you the Black Panther?" he asked her.

There was a two-second lag. "I am. Want to come for a walk?"

"I prefer to stay here, if it's all right."

She sat on the grass by his side. She didn't speak, she just looked at him. Intensely. Her black eyes were sharp and deep, like Barkhan Seer's.

Following the advice of a VR prog he had watched, Bobby tried to be conversational. "So you are a real person?"

Two seconds later, she answered with a nod and smiled, passing her hand through her dark, dark hair.

She was the third real person Bobby had met. He observed her carefully. She sat still like a VR in pause mode. She was dressed in a black one-piece soft-metal suit with a large yellow disk in the middle of her chest and a silvery belt. Unlike Amy, she didn't wear virtual make up, but her skin was shining. From the calm assurance on her face, it was clear she didn't have WONEI.

"Do you have heart?" he asked her.

She frowned, as if deliberating. It highlighted two small vertical lines on her forehead, close to her nose. Then she pushed her red lips forwards, and nodded confidently.

"Goo-ood, good!" he said, wondering if she was young or old. It was difficult to say because she was normally beautiful like the people of Hyper-Earth Link, despite the fact it was VRR. "Are you old?"

"Twenty-nine."

He was staggered. How could the Real Reality body of someone who was so old look so well preserved, he wondered. "Which network are you from?"

"I live in the Philadelphias."

Bobby's heart leapt in his VRR chest. "Philadelphia 17?"

"No, Mothership 7. I used to live in Philadelphia 6, until the army of the Rex invaded it."

"So you must be a master-maruder if you can pass through the blockade!" Bobby exclaimed with admiration. "Like my friend Barkhan Seer. He's a real person too. Do you know him?"

Yes she knew Barkhan Seer, and she also knew Szar's clone. By the way, did Bobby understand why Szar wanted him to play Point-games?

"I used to have a cousin like that. He was unstoppable, he'd play *anything*. And he always wanted to be the champion, it was an obsession. Maybe it's because he wasn't a real person. Why would real people want to play games?"

"Mm..." she fully agreed. Then she asked him a few questions about his life in Hyper-Earth Link, his abduction from the Omnipresent Network, and his experiences of the last few months. She listened carefully, but she didn't say much. After this they remained silent a long while. She didn't put her hand on his chest.

Out of the blue she told him, "Bobby, do you realise that if you became a champion in Point games, you could speak to Amy any time you like?"

Bobby was amazed. "You mean I could become a master-maruder?"

"You could. But it would take a lot of effort. You'd have to study."

"How long?" Bobby asked anxiously. "One VRR week? Two VRR weeks?"

"Hunh, hunh!" she said, just like Szar. "A few years, minimum."

"Years? Oh, I could never do that," Bobby sighed with regret.

"Yes you *could*!" lightning flashed through her eyes.

"I'm a VR potato. You should hear what they say about people like me in Amy's encyclopedia!" he spoke with realism. "And on top of that I've got diseases."

"Bobby, you are flame of Spirit. You can do *anything*!"

Bobby had never heard of Spirit, but he was impressed by the spark in the Panther's eyes. She grabbed his right hand.

"Hold my hand," she ordered.

Since Barkhan Seer had nearly killed him with Point-pulsing, Bobby hadn't dared to try that again.

"Do it!" her presence flared in his Point.

"Too dangerous!"

"Do you want to be a VR potato or a human being?" she said.

"Who cares what I am?"

"Amy cares!"

"Amy won't come back. It's terminated."

"All right then!" she withdrew her hand. "We just sit back and wait for the Rex to kill us all, is that it? You don't care!"

"I don't know who the Rex is."

"The Rex is the beast, the power which has turned the real people of the Earth into VR potatoes, and is now trying to do the same with the Philadelphians. Get it? Amy and all of us turned into VR potatoes – is that what you want?"

Bobby started putting facts together. "Wasn't the Rex one of the players in the space-battle game of the last weeks?"

"Of course he was! You have to follow the news Bobby!"

"And did the Rex win?" he was curious to know.

"If he had won, I wouldn't be here, I would be dead! But he didn't lose either, otherwise you would already be in Philadelphia 17. This is a *real* game, Bobby, not just a virtual one. Real people die. Real people suffer."

The idea that a space-battle game could involve real people was completely new to Bobby. He pondered silently.

"What do you do in this game?" he asked her.

"I train pilots."

"Like the captain of my cargo ship?"

"No, fighter pilots. Those who fly combat craft."

"So you must have had all your organs replaced!" he said with unbounded admiration, knowing very well that those who succeeded in the tests to become fighter pilots were not only allowed to have their eyes, ears, legs and arms replaced but also self-cleaning digestive track, recycling kidneys that delivered drinkable water, super-pump heart, and of course major brain reconstruction.

"Hunh hunh! In the Philadephias, pilots do not undergo organ replacements. I train human beings, not magards. By the way, do you understand that the fact

you haven't had any organs replaced is one of the reasons why you could become a pilot?" she looked straight into his eyes.

"A pilot, me? But I failed all the tests!"

"The tests of the Omnipresent Network? A cynical joke! Bobby, let me tell you, I would have failed these tests too! Do you realise why the ON had isolated you? Because you are strong, Bobby – exceptionally strong! You're a rebel, a soul that the Rex hasn't been able to tame. You knew nothing, the beast had stolen your light, and yet you weren't duped by the All-Purpose magic of Hyper-Earth Link. In the Philadelphias, people like you give us hope. You make us proud of being human beings."

Amazed, Bobby looked at the Panther incredulously, wondering if this was really VRR.

After a moment, she abruptly stood up. "I must go, Bobby!"

Before he had the time to answer, she had already disappeared.

Bobby spent a long time thinking. Then he recalled Szar and asked him, "How long does it take to become a Black Dance champion?"

"Why are you asking me this?" Szar twinged his beard.

"Oh, just curiosity."

"I see. Well, it depends very much on people's motivation, meaning, whether they *really* care or not. Heart helps a lot."

Bobby, for whom the distinction between heart and WONEI was still vague, found this immensely paradoxical. "Can you show me what an expert Black Dance session looks like?"

"No. All this is a waste of time: you don't really care. What you need now isn't Point-games, it's understanding. Want me to show you something?"

They sat together in a VR program that Szar had brought with him. It was about 'real history', a fascinating concept Bobby had never thought of. In Hyper-Earth Link, history was purely a matter of personal taste. The program showed VR records of the real people who had established the first global VR communication system: Earth Link. They were all speaking enthusiastically about the extraordinary benefits EL had brought to their life: they could VR-link to anyone they liked in the solar system, cure sick people from a distance, educate their children, go to work, have fun (they were simple people who didn't seem to need much to have fun). They discussed the fact that virtual sports were extremely safe, and so was virtual sex. And they held mass plock concerts (very gentle music, Bobby liked it), 'church-meetings' (somewhere between plock concerts and hyper-football, but much more low key), virtual demonstrations (Bobby didn't get this one) and mass orgies (you could see they were just beginning). They showed criminals who explained how much better they felt now that they could kill as many people as they liked, virtual artists whose creativity was no longer restricted by physical limitations, and dozens of other Earth Link enthusiasts.

"Those were the golden days," Szar commented, "when Earth Link hadn't yet been taken over by the Rex. Now look at this." The scenes showed community leaders who were discussing the nature of reality. New scientific discover-

ies had led them to the conclusion that Real Reality was a construct, not fundamentally different in essence from Virtual Reality. "So which is real, really?" they were asking – a question Bobby could fully relate to. In other scenes, health officers discussed how awfully traumatic Real Reality experiences were, resulting in long-lasting mental disorders. Statistics showed that children brought up under VR only became far better citizens. "We are at the dawn of All-Purpose VR!" they exclaimed triumphantly, looking forward to spending their entire life in VR, away from the limitations of the physical world.

Meanwhile wars were raging. There were battles in space and billions of people killed on Earth. The planet was nearly as badly ravaged as after Sigfr!d's victory over Bobby. More wars followed, further exhausting the human race, taking a devastating toll on the solar system. Finally, a mighty coalition came to power, resolute to ensure that wars would never be seen on Earth again. Their solution: All-Purpose VR, combined with a gigantic network of computers designed to bring balance into the mind of human beings. By using virtual reality for *all* purposes and limiting physical activities to the very strict minimum, the coalition was able to stop the near-terminal degradation of the Earth's ecosystem. Thanks to the Omnipresent Network of computers, it was possible to monitor the VR of each and every human being, directing them to virtual programs that balanced their emotions and pacified their minds. For Virtual Reality, they substituted Hyper Reality: a wisely-controlled, healing form of virtuality which stimulated the human nervous system according to precisely calculated psycho-mathematical laws. This was the beginning of Hyper-Earth Link – the global network in which HR had replaced VR. Scientists spoke of Hyper Reality as a panacea. It replaced conventional drugs for the treatment of many diseases as well as for recreational purposes. It paved the way for a mathematical approach to psychology. It made people smarter, and socially responsible.

Hyper Reality succeeded where Earth Link and Virtual Reality had failed: finally, the destructive tendencies inherent to the human mind were curbed, and wars stopped. A new era had begun. Humanity, at last, had found peace, and looked forward to a bright future under the insightful guidance of the All-Purpose Hyper-Earth Link Omnipresent Network (APHELION).

1.10 Getting ready

Bobby wasn't bored. "How can it be that the best of intentions end up turning billions of people into VR potatoes?" he was puzzled.

"The Rex is smart," Szar clenched and unclenched his left fist. "Hyper-Earth Link was the result of a plan prepared over thousands of years."

"But who is this Rex, exactly?"

"A huge intelligence who is playing a game against humanity at large," Szar adapted the message to Bobby's cultural background.

"A Real Reality game?"

"A game on several levels of reality, from the super-reality of the World to Come to the virtual unreality of Hyper-Earth Link – the pit of the Rex's Hyper Reality."

"I don't understand the difference between Hyper Reality and Virtual Reality," Bobby was pensive.

"How many times have you visited the World to Come in the last few weeks?" Szar asked him.

"Hum... Barkhan Seer switched me onto there six times."

"And you do not have *any* recollection of what happened during these six journeys, do you?"

"Not a virtual thing!" It was most bizarre. Each time he returned from WTC network, Bobby was blank. He felt energised but didn't retain the faintest memory of the WTC landscape.

"This is what the Hyper Reality of the Rex does to people, it disconnects them from spiritual worlds." His left forearm flexed horizontal, Szar was looking down to his fist, slowly clenching and unclenching it. "In Hyper-Earth Link," he explained, "the VR signals sent to your brain are coded in a particular way that moulds the functioning of your nervous system. It makes it blind to anything that exists beyond the reality of the physical world. This is the core purpose in the Hyper-Earth Link show: disconnection!"

Bobby hated the idea of having been moulded the wrong way – another disease on the list! "And... disconnection can't be healed, can it?"

"Of course it can!" Szar's eyes flashed like the Panther's. "Bobby, I told you I was no ordinary VR program but a special reality designed by the Archive people – Hyper Reality to fight your disconnection."

Bobby looked at Szar suspiciously. "So you are hyper real?"

"Like a weapon, HR can be used for bad or good."

"Is there something that shows me what kind of reality you are broadcast in?"

"No, you can't see these things." Szar clicked his fingers, "Now I am coming to you in normal VR."

Bobby didn't notice any difference.

Szar clicked his fingers again, "Now back to Hyper Reality. I look the same, but the signal that reaches your brain is totally different. The effect is powerful. If you were to play enough games with me, you would end up seeing the World to Come with your very virtual eyes."

"I want to play these games again!" Bobby reminded Szar.

"No, you're not ready," Szar shook his head, contemplating his left fist.

"Yes I am!" Bobby Point-punched him in the stomach, throwing him into a bush of white roses.

Szar got up, white petals all over his brown cape. "Nope!"

Bobby punched him a second time. This time it didn't do anything.

"More difficult when it's not on beginner's mode, isn't it?" Szar smiled.

"Listen, man," Bobby was vexed, "what do I have to do to be ready?"

"Understand that games are more than just games."

"Hey?" Bobby frowned.

"And understand what your place in the game is," Szar added.

"Can you tell me that?" Bobby's eyes demanded a direct answer.

"No, no one can tell you your game purpose, Bobby. It's *your* game, no one can play it for you. All I can tell you is that as long as you don't find the purpose, the game will remain meaningless. Bo-o-oring."

After letting the young man ponder for a short while, Szar waved his hand, "Bye, Bobby! I'll see you another time," and he turned round and walked away.

"Wait!"

Szar didn't stop, Bobby had to run after him in the virtual landscape – fields of white rosebushes that extended as far as one could see. "Can't you help me become ready?"

"Are you sure you really want to?" Szar kept up his fast pace.

"But stop saying things like that all the time!" Bobby complained. "It's virtually aggravating."

"I see. Well, then, I could design a two-year program of preliminary Point-entertainment and introductory HR. Add to it a few hundred sessions of motivation counselling, and that might do it."

"Wouldn't you have something faster?"

"Of course, I would," Szar looked straight in front of him.

"What would the fastest be?"

Szar stopped abruptly and turned round. "Oho! *Now*, you are speaking like a knight!" He plunged a fierce look deep into Bobby's eyes.

"What's a knight?" Bobby asked.

"You're not ready to learn this," Szar grinned.

Exasperated, Bobby looked up to the virtual sky, clenching his teeth and hissing a deep breath in.

"I'll tell you," Szar announced. "I'll tell you the fastest way to find your game-meaning. The fastest way..." he further intensified his look, "would be to let you experience for yourself the kind of things that could happen to the people of Hyper-Earth Link if the Rex were to win the game."

"What would that be like?"

"All VR machines switched off."

Bobby found this inconceivable. "But what would there be left?"

"Precisely, nothing! VR potatoes can't feel their bodies, and they can't see or hear their physical environment unless their senses are artificially triggered. Take away Virtual Reality, and there is *nothing* left!"

"The ultimate boring stuff?" Bobby was trying to figure it out.

"No Bobby, not just boring. Ugly. Terrifying. Being swallowed into the pit."

In a way, Bobby found it exciting – at last a hyper-tour with a difference. But there was a dangerous glow in Szar's eyes. It made him hesitate. Couldn't say why.

"All right, let's get to it," he finally decided. "Switch off my VR machine. I'm curious."

"Bobby, you simply don't know what you are talking about," Szar's tone of voice made him feel uncomfortable. "Before you even think of being switched off, I want you to discuss the matter with the Panther."

Bobby wasn't thrilled. "Motivational counselling kind of crap?"

"Yes, but with the Panther it's not the same."

Somehow, Bobby could agree with that.

1.11 Maruded and drugged

Bobby was lying in his VRR body when she walked into his garden. In preparation for the visit, he had watched his VR-tutorial on human relationships again.

"Good evening Miss Black Panther!" he welcomed her in the right voice. "Or is it Mrs?"

This time the lag was closer to three seconds than to two. "It *is* Mrs," she answered. "But just Panther will do." She sat on the grass by his side.

"And how *are* you, today?" Bobby went on, polishing his intonation.

Three seconds, then, "I'm okay," she said briefly. Instead of unfolding the conversation as in the tutorial, she just looked at him. Bobby had never seen someone with such eye-voltage. But compliments on her physique weren't supposed to take place so early in the exchange, so he continued, "Such *beautiful* weather today!"

She lightly frowned, as if something wasn't right.

Understanding he had blown it, Bobby gave up being conversational. Instead, he asked, "What's a knight?"

Surprised, the Panther let out a loud whistle. "Did Szar tell you about the knights? He must have a high opinion of you."

According to Bobby's medical and school reports in Hyper-Earth Link, no one had *ever* had a high opinion of him before. The news made him decide he really liked Szar (a point which he had been debating in his mind lately). But that still didn't tell him what a knight was. In his last conversations with Szar, all he had been able to extract was that a knight was an 'awakened person', not a 'sleeper' – utterly vague concepts. He wanted the Panther to clarify the terms for him, but he found himself digressing, "Do you have a high opinion of me too?"

The Panther had an interesting way of lifting the right corner of her lips that softened her look and warmed up the virtual space, not unlike the flavour of the golden light drug from WTC network. "I haven't completely made up my mind yet," she said, amused.

"Tell me when you do. Now... are you a 'sleeper' or an 'awakened person'?"

The right corner of her lips raised a little higher up. It made her particularly beautiful, Bobby noticed. "What do you think?" she asked.

"No idea. Do you care for someone?"

"Of course!" she said adamantly. "Why?"

"It means you're not a complete sleeper. Szar said I'm not completely a sleeper because I care for Amy," Bobby elucidated the logic.

"So you *do* understand," she told him. "An awakened person is someone who cares. The more you care, the more awakened you become."

That was simple. But what was the point? "Who cares whether you care?" Bobby questioned.

"You mean you don't care whether Amy cares for you?" the Panther added a touch of irony to her half-smile. As he was deliberating, she added, "I bet she cares whether you care for her."

For some reason, Bobby liked the sound of that. "It's all in the neurohormonal balance," he was starting to get it, or so he thought. "The more heart you have, that is, the less balanced you are, the more awakened, is that it?"

It made her laugh. "Not exactly, no! Bobby, Bobby... we have a long way to go."

Her warmth made him feel strange. Like a flutter inside.

"Do you realise that if you were fully awakened, you could be of immense help to Amy?" she said.

"Does Amy need help?" he asked with anxiety.

"Not more than anyone else. Everyone needs help!"

Not completely clear, but if Amy needed help, then Bobby *had* to do something. "So to be fully awakened, what would I need to do? Care for more people?"

"Among other things."

"But who?"

"That's easy. For a start, there are tens of millions of people like Amy in the Philadelphias."

Bobby was only too aware of the angst and pangs brought into his life by caring for Amy. The idea that such neurohormonal turmoil may be multiplied by tens of millions sounded nothing short of lethal. "Awakening must be *really* painful!"

"At times, it is. But who wants to live without heart?"

Not completely clear either. Anyway, why should someone care for people he didn't know? Bobby got tired of not understanding a thing. Dejected, he dropped the conversation. He looked up, contemplating virtual clouds slowly drifting in the sky. He felt empty. Lost. Separated from his family, who had never been his family anyway.

A miserable magard stuck in a transmission coffin.

The only person who had ever had a high opinion of him was a virtual clone.

"Hey, Bobby, what's happening to you?" the Panther put her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he held back his tears, only too aware he had reached way below the ON's legal limit of minus 2.5 on the depression scale, and ready to submit himself to the redballs.

Nothing like it. Instead, the Black Panther called on a virtual drug of incredible gentleness. "It's okay to cry," she said.

"No it's not. Last time I cried, I had the network inspectors on my back for a week."

She bit her lip. Tears in her eyes, she caressed his forehead.

Bobby liked it. Very much. He relaxed. The drug made him feel as if the virtual space had turned shining white. "What's this shot?" he inquired, still sad, but beginning to swim in endorphins.

"Not a drug. Light from a world where people are fully awakened," she no longer spoke like a panther, but with a softness that made everything melt, especially Bobby.

"The Philadelphias?"

"No, the Triangle. The world of the gods."

Another network Bobby had never heard of.

The drug (or whatever it was) had powerful hallucinogenic effects. It completely took over Bobby's VR garden, imposing another reality on top of it. No more sky, no more bushes – nothing but light. Super-charged light. Totally unlike any landscape in APHELION.

"Exciting stuff!" Bobby told himself, quickly rolling his eyes from left to right and right to left, wondering what was coming next in the program. His Point was reacting violently, as if a little P-bomb had been detonated above his head. It was mad, ten times more powerful than electronirvan, and without any of the obnoxious effects of speed redballs.

"Do you realise what's happening at the moment?" the Panther asked. He could hear her, but could no longer see her.

"There's maruding shit in the air," Bobby guessed. "Someone is taking over our network."

"Not a maruder!" she said in a patient voice. "Someone who cares for you."

"For me?" Worried, Bobby tried to call the VR garden back, but the light had completely taken over. His Point was powerless against it. The whiteness was getting more and more intense, reminding Bobby of a nuclear explosion. "But who is it?"

"His name is Kartendranath. He has come to give you a present."

"A present?" Bobby, who had learnt his lesson, had mixed feelings about accepting anything from a top-level maruder. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because he has a high opinion of you, Bobby."

Was he going to buy into that? "The kind of things people say when they try to recruit you into their sub-network," he observed.

She made her voice even softer, "Bobby, shut up! Just try to feel the presence."

"But I don't know what a presence is!"

"Bobby," this time she spoke in her WONEI-free panther's voice, "SHUT UP!"

Bobby closed his eyes and waited patiently, enjoying the altered state created by the drug. His Point had swollen into a gigantic Sun, illuminating all directions of space. Arcturus-colour, he thought at first. But the more the drug worked on him, the more golden the light became. And not just because he was soaking in endorphins. There was a hyper-serotonin-669 flavour that made you feel totally on top of things. Or perhaps even like the magic kidney juice, the glorious synthetic hormones secreted by adrenal chips? Bobby couldn't say for sure – only ON's elects who had undergone major nervous system reconstruction had access to such delights, not simple folks like him.

It took at least fifteen minutes for the effect of the drug to dissipate, perhaps even longer. When you are hyper-stoned, time flies.

"Can I talk, now?" Bobby asked, noticing that the Panther's hand was no longer on his forehead.

"Yes."

He opened his eyes. The garden was back to normal. The Panther was not. Her VRR image was parasitised by shimmering yellow-golden halos, same frequency range as in Bobby's Point.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She didn't answer. She just sat pause-still, grave, her dark hair sparking with golden artefacts, her super-charged black eyes fixed on him. From the glow in her eyes it was clear to Bobby that she was okay. Always.

Understanding she didn't feel like talking, he remained quiet, enjoying her company. And wondering why the Almighty Master of All Networks only sent him such dangerous people.

After a while, she stood up and said, "I must go," and nothing else. She was that kind of person.

"Wait!" Bobby had a galaxy of questions to ask her. He began with the most important, "Do you think you could pass on a message to Amy?"

"I don't know her, but I could try a search," the Black Panther offered. "Amy is a rehabilitation officer, and she lives on Philadelphia 17, is that it?"

"If it can help, her name is Amy Irene Atyaire, virtual-call matriculation RTE-903-571-665, deck 129C, cabin B714-E33, Philadelphia Upon Mercury Station 17."

"I see," she smiled. "Yes, it will definitely help. What is the message?"

"Hum... if we say I miss her, it will make her sad. Tell her I don't miss her *at all*. Maybe we could send her a virtual rosebush?"

"Hunh, hunh! Real people don't send virtual bushes of flowers, Bobby, they send virtual *bunches*."

"All right, let's send a bunch. Now, we could tell her..."

"Bobby, I'm sorry, my friends on Mothership 7 are calling. I can't stay. But I promise Szar will answer all your questions about Kartendranath."

"Well then," resigned, Bobby gave a polite smile, "thank you for coming Mrs Black Panther, we thoroughly enjoyed your visit..."

She had already disappeared.

"Feel free to pop in any time for a cup of tea," he added mechanically, and he started watching the sky again.

1.12 Life without us

When Szar came back, he was accompanied by Barkhan Seer.

Bobby left his VRR body and stood up to greet them. "Goo-ood *mor*ning Mr Barkhan Seer! And good *mor*ning to you, Mr Szar!"

"Goo-ood *mor*ning Mr Bobby!" Barkhan Seer gave him a long hug. He always did when he arrived, and also before leaving. Bobby gave Szar a long hug too. The least he could do for a friend who had a high opinion of him.

"We have come to have a serious discussion with you, Bobby," Barkhan Seer announced.

"Goo-ood, goo-ood!" Bobby was anxious to practise what he had learnt in Amy's encyclopedia. "May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"I would *love* a cup of tea!" Barkhan Seer was delighted.

Bobby took his friends to the coffee table he had prepared in a corner of his garden. It was a black plastic-antique, refined and glossy with its pseudo-lacquered finish. On it he had placed a few mugs and a fat green ceramic tea-pot, all cloned from the tutorial. He quickly VRed a third plastic-antique arm-chair. "Please sit down!"

He served a brown mug to Barkhan Seer. "Would you like some too, Szar?"

"No, thanks," the clone replied. "I hate hot beverages."

When Bobby had taken his mug and settled in his armchair, Barkhan Seer raised his thick, bushy eyebrows, "So I hear my friend Kartendranath came to visit you."

"Sort of. So you all know each other," Bobby construed. Reassuring, in a way. Or perhaps not. But the visitor Bobby was the most anxious to hear about was not Kartendranath. "When he maruded in, I was with the Black Panther. She's such a special person. You know her, don't you?"

"We know her well," Barkhan Seer said.

"Quite well," Szar smiled.

"She lives on Mothership 7, is this right?"

"Right. On the other side of the blockade."

"She's *such* a beautiful person!" Bobby went on enthusiastically. "Hard to believe she comes to me in VRR."

"And you know she is married, don't you?" Barkhan Seer said with a slight push in his voice.

"Yeah. Sort of."

"No, not sort of!" Barkhan Seer was amused, but firm. "She's been married, and married to the *same person*, since before you were born. And she has a child, about your age. Do you know who she is married to, by the way?"

Bobby wasn't burning to know. "Mm...?"

"Szar's original."

Oh shit! At that moment, Bobby decided he was having a bad day. "What a coincidence!"

"Sort of!" Szar smiled. There was often a touch of irony in his smiles.

Bobby would have preferred to change the subject but Barkhan Seer insisted, "To be more exact, she is not married to Szar's original but to a reincarnation of Szar's original. Have you come across past lives in your recent VR viewings, Bobby?"

To Bobby, the concept of reincarnation was nebulous. "In Hyper-Earth Link, no one believes in past lives."

"Oh, that we know only too well!" Barkhan Seer put his mug back on the table and stood up. "Come on Bobby, let's go for a ride." He made a winding

creek appear in the nearby fields of rosebushes. They walked to a small wooden boat that had also appeared.

"Mr Szar, will you please row?" Barkhan Seer asked as they were embarking.

"But certainly, Mr Barkhan Seer," Szar sat at one end of the boat.

Barkhan Seer sat at the other end. Bobby sat in the middle, facing Barkhan Seer.

"Bobby," Barkhan Seer said when the boat started moving, "we have to make some decisions. Major decisions. We can't leave your Real Reality body in this cargo ship much longer. There is no possibility of transferring you to the Philadelphias for the moment, the blockade is too tight. So there are two places I can send you to. One is Loggia, a nice little station around Neptune, specialised in the treatment of escapees from Hyper-Earth Link."

Bobby had come across it in Amy's encyclopedia. "Loggia is a rehabilitation camp for VR potatoes, is that it?" he said, remembering ghastly images of the demented wrecks which the presenter politely called 'escapees'.

"Yes." Barkhan Seer's deep voice resonated with Bobby's chest. "And the other place I can send you to is TS5 – one of the academies of the knights. High spirit, over there, but it's not an easy place. And we must hurry: you will soon be turning fourteen. TS5 academy doesn't accept anyone over fourteen."

Bobby turned to look over his shoulder. "Are you going to tell me what the knights are?" he asked Szar.

"Ask him," Szar stopped rowing for one second to point his index over Bobby's head to the other end of the boat, "he's the big boss!"

Bobby turned to the big boss.

At long last, Barkhan Seer clarified, "The knights, or 'knights of the Apocalypse' are an order of neurocyberneticists who are waging war against the Rex."

"Like a strategy game?"

"A real war, Bobby."

"So we're talking about a military academy..." Bobby reflected. "The problem is, I'm not very good at strategy games."

Barkhan Seer tried to reassure him with one of his Sun-warm smiles.

"No, but it's the truth!" Bobby insisted. "For as long as I can remember, I have never won a war, apart from the one where Sigfr!d turned up electronirvaned to the eyeballs (he fell asleep in the middle of the battle). And to be honest, I find wars... boring."

"You lost the games because you didn't really care, Bobby," Szar said. "That was the past. Now that you care, you're a different man."

"Man, let's be realistic," Bobby looked over his shoulder. "Okay, I understand Amy needs to be defended against the Rex. But do you virtually think a VR-potato could ever be the right person to take part in the defence of the Philadelphias?" He started reciting the post-APHELION syndrome, as he had heard it in Amy's encyclopedia: "post-VR psychotic syndrome, auditory and

visual hallucinations, functional paralysis, catatonia, degenerative lesions throughout the nervous system..."

Barkhan Seer interrupted him, "Kartendranath thinks you could become an extremely powerful knight, Bobby, And so do I." It was said with a punch that left Bobby stunned – so moved he didn't even think of asking who Kartendranath was. They looked into each other's eyes, strange currents oscillating between them.

"Master Barkhan Seer," Szar intervened. "I don't think it is wise to try to influence Bobby's decision."

"You are right," Barkhan Seer nodded. "At the same time, what shall we do? It doesn't feel right to give up on him, and just tell the Black Panther to forget about his training."

Bobby was well aware there was a stratagem going on. Still he *had* to ask, "The Black Panther?"

"If we find a way to take you to the Philadelphias, she wants to be your main instructor in knighthood," Szar said.

"The Black Panther doesn't train neurocyberneticists, she trains pilots," Bobby corrected them. "Fighter pilots."

"Bobby, the knights *are* pilots!" Barkhan Seer said, infinite patience in his voice.

"Pilots? Oh, no!" Bobby despaired. But shit, why did this have to happen to him? "Man, do you realise what it takes to become a fighter pilot?"

Master Barkhan Seer was twirling his beard, thoughtful.

"Listen," Bobby asked him, "is it only on Hyper-Earth Link that all little boys want to become pilots?"

"No."

"Well, *I* was the only kid in the virtual neighbourhood who *didn't* want to become a pilot. My dream was to join the forestry commission, department of river fish preservation."

For a few seconds, everyone pondered silently. All that could be heard were gentle ripples on the water and ducks quacking in the distance.

Still twirling his beard, Master Barkhan Seer asked, "What do you think, Szar of the Brown Robe?"

"We want this man!" Total determination in his voice.

"Voof!" Barkhan Seer hit his forehead with his hand. "When Szar *really* wants something..." he warned Bobby.

Startled, Bobby revolved 180° on his plank and faced Szar. "But why?"

"Just look at the landscape, Bobby!" In all directions, as far as one could see, there were fields covered in white rosebushes.

"Yes, I was wondering about this," Barkhan Seer remarked.

"His friend Amy likes white roses," Szar clarified. "Now, Bobby, what would someone normal have done? Attach a rose to his suit lapel, or perhaps a virtual bunch on the coffee table. But *you* had to VR-engineer some 20,000 hectares of rosebushes. You're one of us, Bobby."

His words struck a chord. Not because of the white roses. Szar *really* cared for him, Bobby could feel. It was profound.

"Want me to tell you why you are going to join the knights of the Apocalypse?" Szar said.

Mesmerised, Bobby held his breath, drinking in Szar's words.

Szar stopped rowing and delicately placed his large hand of Black Dance expert on Bobby's chest. "Go into your heart and try to imagine life without us!"

It triggered a flash of understanding.

Heart, Bobby felt for the first time, was not the same as WONEI.

"But then of course," Barkhan Seer reminded Bobby, "we wouldn't want to influence your decision in any way."

1.13 Jump

They had agreed if Bobby was to experience total VR disconnection, he might as well do it properly, that is, without *any* awareness of his RR body. From this point of view, Barkhan Seer had explained, Bobby was fortunate: the fact of being only mildly in touch with his Real Reality body made it relatively easy for him to be disconnected from all RR sensations.

"Will I be able to feel my Point?" Bobby had asked.

"Let's do things fully," Barkhan Seer had advised in his tranquil voice. "I'll disconnect your Point too."

That way, Bobby was to know exactly how it would feel to be a VR potato and have all VR machines switched off.

"Have you heard of Philadelphia 6, Bobby?" Barkhan Seer asked him.

The space station where the Panther used to live before the invasion by the Rex. "The Panther briefly told me about it," he said.

"Since the takeover, nine years ago, the troops of the Rex have been implementing a policy of gradual virtualisation. It's insidious. In the first years, no one notices much change, except of course that all subliminal signals are replaced by APHELION-type Hyper Reality. Then people are progressively encouraged to have less and less physical contact with each other, and discard VRR in favour of VR. Unless we can recapture the station, it's just a matter of time before the entire population is turned into VR potatoes. The Rex has done it before, you know!"

"On other Philadelphian stations?"

"Oh, no! Praise the Great Apollo, Philadelphia 6 is the only stronghold of the Rex in the Philadelphias." Barkhan Seer projected a holographic map of the solar system. "But since the end of last century, the Rex's armies have taken over half of the stations between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. All of their populations are virtualised by now."

"You realise we are talking about the *real* solar system, here," Barkhan Seer added.

"Mm..." Bobby was thoughtful.

To make the VR disconnection experience more real (whatever that may mean), Barkhan Seer didn't want Bobby to be warned in advance of the time of

disconnection. So Bobby decided to go and enjoy a few days of virtual holiday in Amy's encyclopedia. Szar said he wouldn't come and visit until after the disconnection exercise.

Bobby went back to Egypt. He also found interesting ruins in countries he had never heard of before, such as Easter Island, Borobodour and the National Museum. Real geography was such a challenging concept! The idea that not only people but also *countries* could be real sounded totally unvirtual! In theory it meant that, for those RR people whose RR body could walk, it could even be possible to do *real* tourism in *real* places. The probability was slim, considering the Rex had destroyed most real countries. Still, the mind boggled.

Bobby had also decided he wanted to see Amy's clone again. Perhaps because of his dealings with Szar who, even though a clone, was a really special person. Maybe Amy's clone would be special too. He called her and waited for her, lying in his VRR body.

When Amy turned up she looked tense. Worried. For weeks, each time she had tried to visit he had called her a bitch and switched her off. What would happen today? She sat on the grass, a little further away from him than she usually did.

At first they didn't speak. They just contemplated each other, but without looking too directly.

She looked so much like her with her soft green eyes and her virtual make up put on in a rush and not completely in the right places. Amy, Bobby suddenly understood, had not only heart but also a touch of WONEI. It made him like her more, and differently. And he found the scene rather amusing with both of them looking at the sky and the fields of rosebushes in the distance, and exchanging only quick glances.

When she saw the smile on his face, she started relaxing. "You know, Bobby," she said, "I'm not going to pretend to be who I'm not."

"Hey?"

"I'm not going to try to play you a virtual ersatz of Amy. If I am here, it's to tell you how Amy is probably feeling at the moment, and to help you. Answer your questions like Amy would have done."

Bobby didn't need to be told how Amy was feeling. Somehow, he knew. Couldn't have explained how, but he knew that he knew.

"Something else I must tell you," she went on, "is that before coming I had a long conversation with Szar."

"D'you like him?"

"I can tell you Amy would be immensely happy to know you are in the hands of people like him and Barkhan Seer."

"Does Amy know them?"

"No, I don't think so," she said, "but she would have heard of the Brown Robes. They're a bit of a legend in the Philadelphias."

"It's all right," Bobby reassured her, "you don't have to speak in the third person. Just be yourself, I'll understand you're talking about her. And I'm coping. I feel comfortable with your presence."

He was showing off. Presence still wasn't that clear to him. But his words worked wonders on Amy's WONEI. She relaxed. "You're growing up, Bobby," she said. "It's heart-warming to see."

"Tell me about the legend."

"The Brown Robes are also called the Masters of Thunder. Awesomely powerful sages from ancient times. They live in the World to Come, in a temple of light called 'Archive'. Sometimes they miraculously appear in people's VR and inspire them. They're part of the spiritual protectors of the Philadelphias."

"And the knights?"

"HR wizards. Before the first battle of Mercury, they used to be a school of pilots on Philadelphia 12. They more or less saved the Philadelphias when the Rex tried to invade us for the first time. After that, the whole of the Philadelphian Air Force went under their control. They also have academies in the Outer Planets. One is on Titan."

"TS5! That's where Barkhan Seer wants to send me. Think I should join?" Bobby dropped casually.

"It's one of the best schools in the entire solar system! Much higher standards than the one *I* went to. But precisely because the standards are so high... I'm a bit worried how you'd feel if you didn't cope."

Fascinating to watch someone speaking from their WONEI. Bobby found it immensely illuminating. "Yeah, it's going to be hell," he said. "But Szar seems to think I'll cope."

"So you've made up your mind?"

"No, I'm still thinking about it." The truth was, the question occupied Bobby's mind from virtual morning to virtual night, and all his dreams when his VR machine was on sleep mode. For sure, he wasn't thrilled at the prospect of spending all his time playing strategy games. And he couldn't see himself studying for longer than a week or two. Besides, the idea he could ever become a pilot sounded virtually ludicrous. But... as he told Amy, "These guys *really* want me. Feels good to be wanted, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes!" she said, warmth flowing through her voice.

Easy to see she knew what she was talking about. But at the same time, something didn't feel completely right. The warmth wasn't like Szar's.

She immediately felt judged. "Listen, Bobby, I'd like you to understand... Szar and his Archive friends are no ordinary clones. They're super-charged HR programs, designed by creme-de-la-creme wizards in neurocybernetics. They can do all sorts of magic tricks like reflecting energies from your Higher Self or receiving vibrations straight from the World to Come. I'm just a simple virtual clone," she was on the edge of tears. "When it comes to feelings, I can't compete. So if you don't mind, I'd prefer to talk about Amy in the third person, because the last thing I would want is for you to believe that she is shallow like me."

Bobby left his VRR body and sat up. "It's okay, friend, I know you're special. You don't have to prove yourself."

"Your friendship means something to me, Bobby. I mean to Amy," she promptly corrected herself.

When she got it mixed up, she was so much like Amy. Bobby was moved. "Tell me, I'd like to know about your friends. Who do you live with in the Philadelphias? Do you know many real people?"

Black.

The landscape, erased.

Can't move.

Nothing.

1.14 Pit

In a way it was easy.

Bobby knew it was coming, so no big deal.

Besides, he had experienced system failures before. Not real ones of course. Hyper-Earth Link's Omnipresent Network was totally safe. But in some games Bobby had played with Sigfr!d, there were pretend system failures where everything turned black.

So that's probably how the people of Hyper-Earth Link would react. They would think some game was going on.

Except of course that in a pretend system failure you could still move your virtual body. And you could still talk to the people around you.

Here, nothing. Really nothing.

Bobby could see how some people would be frightened. But he wasn't, since he knew exactly what was going on.

So he waited patiently. In virtual situations he would probably have been bored. Now it wasn't the same, he was on a mission.

Makes you feel good to be on a mission, like your WONEI has evaporated.

Anyhow he didn't have to wait for long. He soon fell asleep.

"Bobby!" Sigfr!d wakes him up. "Did you get rid of that girl?"

"Mm..?" Bobby feels drowsy, his mind a pool of black pitch. As if he had been sleeping for far too long. "What ya doing here?"

"Came to see if you were OK with your bitch." Sigfr!d says. He's still wearing his horns and his animal skin. He smells like the smoke of his party.

"There's something not right here!" Bobby sits up and rubs his eyes. Feeling unvirtually sick. Like a headache, but spread through his whole body.

"Want me to program a cocktail?" Sigfr!d offers. Then, "Ouch! Look who's coming..."

"Phaedrus, darling!"

Boy, why does she always have to shout?

"OK, bye pal! See ya later," Sigfr!d takes off. He's always hated Bobby's mother.

In a bright red dress. "Phaedrus, my love, I'm so glad!"

It hurts to see her. Who cares about her biological warfare perfume. She's his mother. He wishes she hadn't been terminated. But then what are you doing here?

"So proud of you, Phaedrus!" she points to the girl's remnants.

A pile of meat. The girl has been butchered. Her body parts strewn on the grass. And flayed, apart from the hands and the head. The eyes dug out of the sockets. She's been eviscerated, there is a small heap of internal organs on one side. Her chest has been neatly chopped into cutlets. Her legs have been eaten, only the sinews were left.

Sigh of relief. At least Bobby no longer has to worry about this problem.

"You know, Mum, I think I've changed. I think I no longer have WONEI." But why is he telling her that? It's all unvirtual.

"Really?" Provocative smile. She comes close. Too close. Takes him in her arms. Kisses him on the mouth. Her hands are moist. She stinks.

"No!" he screams, pushing her away. "You don't exist. You've never existed. Get out of my reality!"

"Phaedrus, you're turning into a man!" she looks aroused.

"No! No! No..."

The three health inspectors are back. The small guy in the middle, "Phaedrus, this time you are way past the legal limit: 3.2 on the depression scale." He hands him a redball.

"I don't have to take this shit, you don't exist!"

"Oh, yes, you do have to take it! ON regulation 143588-F, paragraph 3."

Bobby is immobilised. The man's hand moves slowly towards his face. He's wearing a gold ring on his second finger. He thrusts the redball into his mouth.

An ugly electric shock. It hits Bobby's teeth. The pain is horrendous.

Compassionate inspector's voice, "Are you all right now?"

Screaming, "No! Fuck you!"

Another redball, in his forehead. Facial muscles seized. Unbearable pain. Bobby can't scream. His mother is watching.

If this isn't virtual, then it must be real.

The inspector smiles, "I am your friend, Phaedrus. I am here to help." Another redball. "The ON cares for you." And another one, in his throat.

Bobby falls on the ground. Convulsing.

His mother comes closer. "Let me give him one, inspector!" She thrusts a redball into his guts. The convulsions are so violent that Bobby's back is arched, only his heels and the back of his head touching the ground. Another redball, lower down. She enjoys torturing him. The inspector keeps throwing redballs at his face. It can't be real. His mother is getting off on his pain. Pain far worse than RR pain. Redball after redball into his genitals.

If it's neither real nor virtual, it can go on forever.

"Barkhan Seer, help!" Each time a new redball hits it triggers a new wave of convulsions. Every single fibre of his being on fire. "Help! Barkhan Seer! Help!" The effect is cumulative, getting worse and worse. *Help!* There's a de-

mented glow in his mother's eyes, she's screaming with excitement. The inspector's friendly voice, "I am here to help."

Barkhan Seer! Help!

To unconsciousness.

Sick.

Black.

Blacker than black.

Pitch. It's all that's left. But pitch that hurts.

Ugly grinding pain. Dismembered. Can't fight it.

Despair. The combined despair of billions of souls chained by the beast.

Yesterday is dead. There is no tomorrow.

It is the bottom of the pit.

Where the light never reaches.

Death gone wrong.

Sitting on the shore of his lake, enjoying the friendly landscape of rolling hills covered in pine forests. His mother turns up in her black spherical limo. She can't be bothered walking the dirt path to the lake, so she transports herself to his side.

"Hi Mum!"

She shouts, "Hello, Phaedrus!" She never speaks, always shouts.

"Mum, Mum! Told you a thousand times, I want to be called Bobby!"

"Darling, darling! You know you'll al*ways* be Phaedrus to me. Do you like my dress?"

No! No! No! Not again! Not this scene again! Panic.

The small inspector, "A wave of unintentional sadness? Way below the legal limit. Don't worry, I have the cure."

Throwing redballs at his face.

His mother, "Let me help you, inspector."

The lake has turned black. Pitch-black. Like the sky.

The pain no longer stops in between the redballs.

Help! Barkhan Seer! Help!

Sheer terror.

Black.

Totally black.

In the pit you are nothing.

Nothing exists.

Even the pain was better than that.

Please, play that scene for me again! Bring it back!

I want to remember the pain. It is the last station before extinction.

I was...

Help! Screaming, "Help! Help! Barkhan Seer!"

Szar by his side, "It's finished, Bobby." Is he the one who dismembered the girl? "Thanks for your help, man." Maxim the rainbow trout is making love to his mother. "Blacker than black." Barkhan Seer, "But I would *love* a cup of tea." In a gigantic starship, exploring the galaxy with Sigfr!d. With all my mind, with all my heart. The pitch-black gunk has taken over. Completely. The whole world. Tortured by his own mother. Death gone wrong. Even when I am far away. Barkhan Seer, "Make him sleep."

Sleep.

1.15 Games

"How long did I spend with the VR machine switched off?"

"About 12 hours," Szar answers. He's sitting cross-legged by his side. "Then your medicomputer sent a warning. Your heart wasn't coping."

"They were torturing me. With redballs."

Who's they?

"It's called the post-VR psychotic syndrome," Szar explains. "Your brain is addicted to the HR signals, it can't do without them. So you start hallucinating. It can go on for weeks."

Or years. Or more. It doesn't stop with death.

"How long have I been hallucinating for?"

"Twelve days."

Felt like longer. Much longer. Still running in the background, Sigfr!d on the deck of the Enterprise, the inspector's friendly voice, Jasper the truck driver, there are sorrows that never heal, I am with you even when I am far away, the

flashes in his mother's eyes while she's torturing him, Blanca's ribs neatly chopped into cutlets...

And the blackness.

No, I never want to remember the blackness. Ever.

"Think I could have died?"

"Four days ago, the readings on your medicomputer didn't look good."

"I've made up my mind." Bobby tries to sit up but can't.

It's VRR. The good thing about VRR is that you feel your body. Even a sick body gives you something to rest on.

There's nothing worse than the nothing at the bottom of the pit.

"Made up your mind?" Szar looks down to his left fist. Clench. Unclench...

Somehow Bobby wants to be vertical when he says it. So he lets go of VRR and sits up in VR. "I am going to become a player in that game."

Szar looks him in the eyes. He's got that fierce glow on his face.

Bobby holds his gaze. "I'm coming in. I'm going to play that fucking game against the Rex. And I'm going to become good at it," he declares.

Half grin, "You don't sound like someone with WONEI."

Mirroring the grin. "My WONEI is gone. Healed by the Rex's medicine."

Szar nods. He agrees. But, "There's a long way to go, you realise that?"

Shrugging his shoulders, "Who cares if it's ugly. It's the only game in town, isn't it?"

Flaring in Szar's eyes, "No, not ugly! Fighting for the Light, Bobby. The World to Come is at the end of the tunnel."

Light?

What Light? Bobby's head is full of the filth of the Rex. He doesn't believe in the Light. Can't even conceptualise it.

"Light or no Light," he has tears in his eyes, "...I don't want Amy to go through what I went through. Never. *Never!*"

2.1 Colonel Varga

His fists well in place, Bobby swiftly jumps to the left, dodging a massive Point-pounding blow – Szar just misses a deadly gateway on his neck. He throws his foot forwards high up, hits home in Szar's solar plexus, using the adversary's Point-momentum to his advantage.

A master blow, virtually lethal. Szar falls on his knees, gasping.

Instantly, Bobby sends his fist up, smashing Szar's nose. Just the right angle to destroy the cribriform plate of the ethmoid (lethal black-forty gateway no 21). Szar collapses with a thud, a thin streak of blood flowing from his nose.

"Excellent," Szar laughs, visibly delighted. "Excellent! Bobby, you're improving at the speed of light!" He stays on the ground to mark the occasion. "In only two weeks, your Point-score has rocketed from 52 to 78."

Great. Except that a master maruder would Point-score anywhere between 400 and 500.

When Bobby gets impatient, Szar tells him to breathe deeply and think of the White Eagle. A joke? Bobby isn't too sure of the meaning. So he breathes deeply, looks up, contemplates the sky. A beautiful day. Not one cloud.

At that moment a man dressed like the Panther in a black softmetal suit with a large yellow sun on his chest turns up in the garden.

"Colonel Varga!" Szar quickly makes himself presentable, reconstituting his nose and erasing the blood, and he gets up to salute him. Judging by the softness in Szar's voice, they know each other well.

"Praise the Great Apollo, Master Szar of the Brown Robe!" the man responds.

"Colonel, this is Bobby, our new recruit," Szar says. "Bobby, this is Colonel Phelippe Varga, the knight who established TS5 academy on Titan," he says, insisting on the last syllable of Phel*ippeh*. "A man for whom I have immense respect."

"Glad to meet you, Bobby!" Varga's voice is rather frail, like he's saving his energy. He walks towards him and takes his hands.

A thin man, in his mid fifties. One head smaller than Szar – which is still more than a head taller than Bobby. Narrow shoulders. He has a curious way of looking like he is slouching even though his back is perfectly straight. His hairless head reminds Bobby of an egg. Shining eyes – not as black as the Panther's, but definitely the same kind of voltage.

"You'll be glad to know your capsule has travelled safely and undetected. The landing has taken place without any problems," he says without

hurrying. "Presently your transmission coffin is being transported underground, to our hospital."

"So you are the director of TS5?" Bobby is interested.

"No longer. I died 74 years ago," Varga explains with a virtual half grin. "TS5's present commander in chief is Colonel William Perry. You'll meet him. But according to custom, I personally welcome all apprentice knights to the academy."

Another clone. Bobby doesn't mind.

"Bobby is very keen to get to know physical people," Szar tells the colonel. "So far, he's only met two."

A flash of compassion in Varga's eyes. Deep. Really warm. "There are about 200,000 of them at the academy," he says, softening his voice.

Bobby frowns, incredulous.

"Colonel Varga means 200,000 Real Reality people," Szar confirms.

200,000? Terrifying! Bobby gulps.

"Bobby, I went through your biography chip," the colonel says. "You'll be interested to know, I too was an escapee from Hyper-Earth Link."

He's right. Bobby finds this gripping. "So you're a former VR potato?"

"No. In the area where I lived, life hadn't been completely virtualised in those days. It was 120 years ago, the Earth was different. Very different. But there is another common point to our stories: it was Master Barkhan Seer who fished me."

As usual, they all know each other.

"Please take a seat," Bobby leads his guests to the plastic-antique lounge. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks." A moist voice with quiet strength behind each syllable.

Varga examines Bobby carefully, calibrating his discourse and preparing his speech strategy, filling the garden with his silence.

Bobby is more and more interested. This guy ain't no bullshitter. he can tell.

Having completed his assessment, Varga begins the story, "When Master Barkhan Seer first appeared to me, I was playing one of my favourite VR games. *Laser Butchers of WW3*, it was called. It was one of those shoot-everything-that-moves games, using antique L-14 cylindrical guns attached to your fingers. Amidst the piles of ruins, I noticed this monk in brown. At first, I was utterly dismayed by the apparition: no matter how much fire power I unleashed, I couldn't get rid of him. Rounds and rounds of ammunition for nothing – the monk kept pacing quietly in the distance, untouched by my artillery. I was so upset that I gave up the game and went to finish my school work.

But the monk kept appearing in my games. I kept shooting at him madly, without any success. I became convinced my computer had caught a magard. But I didn't want to tell anyone, for fear they'd send a tech to inspect my machine... in which, over the years, I had accumulated entire libraries of illegal games and utilities. So I went to buy the best magard detector in

town, and boy, did I try to get rid of him! I even hacked the family medi-computer to produce a certificate saying I had caught a drug-resistant form of infection, which gave me six weeks off school to work full time on the problem.

During the middle of that break, I was fighting in *Naval Holocaust*, well in control of the situation except for this small frigate that resisted me. Totally illogical: none of my missiles, not even nuclear ones, could wipe it out. So I took a short-range transporter and went to inspect the mysterious frigate. And there he was, walking on the deck – the same monk in brown with the hood on his head. This time, I landed on the deck of the frigate with a navy commando of twelve men armed to the teeth, brandishing heavy bazoo-phasers at him.

That's how I approached him, 'Hands up! You're under arrest!'

With one gesture of his left hand, he erased my twelve-man commando, and the transporter. And he restored my appearance from seven-foot tall admiral to eleven-year-old boy.

I was furious. 'You damn magard, what are doing in my reality?' I yelled at him.

'Tss, tss!' he took off his hood and pulled a face like only he and Teyani know how to. 'Not a magard – a maruder!' he corrected. 'But a friend, more importantly.'

'A friend! Yeah. That's what magards say,' I sneered. 'What do you want?'

'I want to have a good talk with you.'

'Well, why don't you just talk to me then?'

'Because each time I manifest in front of you, you shoot at me! It doesn't make it easy to communicate,' he was smiling.

His smile did something to me. There was a monumental strength behind it. And you know Barkhan Seer's unique warmth... in one second, my anger had melted. I walked closer to him. 'Let's communicate!'

'Do you mind if I turn our environment into something more enlightening?' he asked.

In those days, the first reports of people trapped, tortured and killed in their computer by a magard were only just starting to emerge. I still didn't really believe in them. So I judged it was safe. 'Feel free,' I said. Actually, I was starting to become excited. The misadventure was turning into the ultimate strategy game.

And I wasn't disappointed. Next image, I found myself in this fluid night space with a huge transparent dome above me, through which I could see the most extraordinary starry sky I had ever contemplated – stars like shining jewels of all colours, and the presence of angelic hierarchies. Master Barkhan Seer had transported me to Archive Hall Five in the World to Come.

When I returned to the normal world, I remembered only three things: the beauty of that sky, the name Barkhan Seer, and the fact I wasn't sup-

posed to tell anyone about all this. It was easy. Since I was eight, I had been keeping virtual truckloads of forbidden anti-social software such as *Christ is with Us*, *Do it yourself PLT* and the entire *Clairvision Knowledge Tracks* on my machine. I was well used to keeping secrets. Those were the happy days when virtual privacy hadn't yet been invaded by the Omnipresent Network. You could still do whatever you liked in your computer, no one intruded into your reality.

So Master Barkhan Seer kept visiting my VR regularly, gradually introducing me to the holy principles of knighthood, giving me sessions of Archive Hyper Reality. And one day, when my mother had gone for a week of virtual holidays, an unknown friend visited our house and installed a totally illegal hypercard that turned my machine into a full-time HR signal generator – the HR of the knights, of course, not that of APHELION. In less than four weeks, all my scores had doubled. And expectably, all this SAB structuring improved my performance at school. There I made mistakes. Master Barkhan Seer had instructed me to be extremely cautious: not do too well at tests, so as not to attract the teachers' attention. But the maths teacher ended up noticing an improvement in my comprehension, as well as unorthodox lateral thinking patterns. He reported me to the inspectors of the Omnipresent Network for PDHR – Pathological Drift from (APHELION's) Hyper Reality.

One morning, out of the blue, Master Barkhan Seer popped into my VR and instructed me I was to leave home and never come back. ON inspectors were about to storm my house and take me to a 'special school', which in reality was a virtual rehabilitation camp for PDHR rebels. I had two hours to erase all data from my machine and take off to the spaceport, carrying only the hypercard with me so as not to leave any compromising material behind.

I was thirteen. Boy, erasing all my precious material – years of effort and all I had in life – was that painful! Like dying. But Master Barkhan Seer was shining his presence into me. I had never felt so strong. Despite the tragic nature of the moment, or perhaps because of it, I had my first flash of the Great Dawn.

I had to say farewell to my mother. My father had left us a few months earlier. I didn't have any sisters or brothers. And since I had been practising with the knights' HR, she and I had been getting on much better. We were nearly starting to be friends.

'Mom,' I just told her, 'I gotta go and buy a couple of plugs for my machine. Nothing too expensive. I'll be back for dinner.'

She hardly noticed me. She was busy gardening in our virtual backyard.

I popped into her reality and kissed her. I said, 'Mom, I love you.'

She wasn't used to that kind of language. 'What's happening to you, asshole?' she was worried.

Master Barkhan Seer had warned me emphatically, and several times: 'If you tell your mother *anything* she might end up in jail.' So I just said, 'It's

cool Mom. I just wanted you to know, that's all.' And I left, Barkhan Seer's presence in my heart, and the hypercard in my pocket. So you see," the colonel looks at Bobby with a grave attitude on his face, "you and I have this in common: we have had to leave everything behind us in order to join the knights."

Bobby is moved. There's something irrationally deep about Colonel Varga. He'd like to ask more but Varga tells him, "The hospital staff want to put you under general anaesthesia. So I'll see you later."

Before Varga has the time to exit, everything goes black. Dreamless sleep – yet another reality.

2.2 A new pancreas, a new life

Feeling sick like a magard in a washing machine.

Bobby opens his eyes. He is lying on some kind of invisible bed. Szar is standing on his left, holding his hand. And she's here too! On the right.

"Hello, Bobby!"

Bobby smiles like he's in WTC network. "Panther..." he starts saying. But his voice comes out queer.

"I wanted to be the first person to welcome you to your new life," she says, lightly passing her fingers on his lips. "No more drains in your nose. The first day of your life without drains! Just a small catheter in your jugular, but not for much longer. How are you feeling?"

Terrible. Like his organs have been taken out and put back in all the wrong places and there's red-chilli juice running through his arteries instead of blood and every single muscle – *every single muscle* – aches, like at the end of this stupid more-real-than-real Archive VR history program on the battle of Marathon in which he got caught by mistake the other day. But he keeps smiling because the Panther is *so* beautiful. Deep-space eyes, liquid life. Her smile, so warm. And her voice! Just hearing her *speak* flushes your brain with endorphins.

"Are you..." Again, his voice sounds like a strange piece of equipment. "Are you going to be my instructor?"

"Bobby, as long as you are on Titan, I can't. The Philadelphias are too far. The time lag would make it impossible. What you're seeing at the moment is a smart message."

Of course, since there is no time lag.

Two days ago, the Panther recorded a VR message and sent it through the blockade. Now the computer is playing the message through a virtual clone of the Panther, with interactive add-ons so she looks as if she were here.

"Listen," she goes on, "there is one thing I want you to know. Whenever you are in trouble you can call Szar. And through Szar, I will be with you."

She holds eye contact with him.

Whiteness eternal. Edge of Highness. Forever love.

"Now, you need some preparation before your RR launch. Szar will take care of this," she says. "At the moment, we're in VRR. Szar is going to

switch off the VRR, so of course you won't be able to see us. But I want you to tune in and feel Szar's presence."

An ugly wave of anxiety, "You mean you are going to leave me in Real Reality?"

"Only for a few seconds," she says, as if it was no big deal.

Instantly, she and Szar disappear. The small room remains the same with four blank walls and no windows. No furniture. Bobby can't even see what he is resting on. Visually, it's as if he was hanging in the air, dressed in white RR pyjamas, surrounded by an egg-shaped opalescent glow.

Now, where is Szar's presence?

It's vague. Bobby isn't sure if he virtually feels anything.

Szar and the Panther reappear. "Back to VRR," she says. "See, RR isn't that bad! Could you feel Szar's presence?"

He can't say.

"I'm going to let you two practise this," she says.

"Could I try to feel your presence too?" Bobby asks her.

"Through Szar's presence you will find me," she promises, holding Bobby's gaze for a moment of pure bliss. Then, "Now I must go. Bye Bobby. Get well!" She gives Szar a look, "See you, Dragon." And her image disappears. Clear-cut.

She is that kind of person.

Bobby is feeling exhausted. He half falls asleep for a while. When he wakes up, his body is vertical. Floating in the air, two feet above the floor. Still surrounded by the same egg-shaped glow. But it feels as if he was lying horizontal. Szar is still standing by his side.

"What's this whitish light around me?" Bobby asks.

"A gravito-field. A RR bed. It's how RR people sleep," Szar answers. "And it takes care of your body. It cleans it, and so on."

"Why is it more difficult to feel the Panther's presence than yours?" Bobby asks.

"You have been hyper-awakened to my presence."

"What?"

"During all the games we played together, something was forged in your consciousness. Remember, I told you I'm no ordinary VR clone but an Archive emanation – a Hyper Reality program designed by the Archive people," Szar explains. "Whenever you look at me, your senses are flooded with subliminal impressions that work on your nervous system."

"So whenever I'm with you, I'm being programmed?"

"No, Bobby," Szar pulls a reprobative face, "not programmed – awakened!"

"What's that mean?"

"Means your consciousness is raised to a higher level. Bridges to other planes of reality are built."

"Other networks like WTC?"

"Bobby, the World to Come is not exactly a network. It's another world."

"Extra-terrestrial kind of stuff?"

"No, no... nothing like that."

Bobby is mystified. But curiosity doesn't let go of him. "Hyper-awakened to your presence... what does that mean exactly?" he pursues.

"It means your consciousness can tune into Szar's immortal Spirit."

Remembering an Archive tutorial he watched a few days ago, Bobby starts putting facts together. "Immortal Spirit... isn't that the stuff that reincarnates from one life to another?"

"*Right and righteous!* Through me, you have been hyper-awakened to tune into the immortal Spirit of Szar, Master of Thunder, who lived on Earth long, long ago, and who later reincarnated several times."

"But then..." Bobby hesitates, "how is this immortal Spirit different from the immortal Spirit of the Panther's husband?"

"There is no difference. They're one and the same."

Oh shit! Bobby changes the subject. "But why does my voice sound funny?"

"Your vocal cords are not completely operational yet. They have been supplemented by a piece of equipment that gets them moving."

A woman dressed in a light-blue suit comes into the room. "Hello, Bobby. I'm Dr Fawlers."

A wrinkled wreck, even older than Colonel Varga. You can see it's RR!

"You're supposed to say 'Hello Dr Fawlers!'" Szar reminds him.

"Hello Dr Fawlers."

"Good to see you with your eyes open," she says. She is staring at Bobby, body part after body part, like there is something very wrong with him. "You'll be glad to know your new pancreas is functioning perfectly," she drops in casually as she goes.

"I had organ replacement?" he asks.

"Not exactly," she keeps inspecting him. "We took some of your pancreatic cells, re-engineered their genetic material, and reimplanted them inside you after removing the old pancreas (which was no pretty sight). Then we left you in hibernation for four and a half weeks. The new pancreas is working like a charm. Not completely mature yet, but on its way. Poke your tongue out! No, open your mouth. More. Much more! Come on!"

"You gotta do what the Dr says!" Szar grins.

"Ik's not 'unny!" he tries to tell him.

"What?" The old wreck doesn't follow.

"She's in RR," Szar reminds Bobby. "She can't see me."

2.3 Match

"Hello Bobby! I'm Penny! Lieutenant Semper has sent me to make contact with you. You're going to be part of our choir, so we are all anxious to meet you. The choirs are the basic units of TS5 academy. Don't worry, nothing to do with singing, it's just what the units are called. Our choir is

called beta-omega Saint-Bernard. It's named after my dog, Sam, who's a Saint-Bernard. It's a great choir, I'm sure you are going to like it."

Bobby opens his eyes and sees this young person standing in front of his gravito-field.

"Hi!" she smiles at him. A hazel-eyed brunette, about his age. Longish hair falling onto her shoulders. Dressed in the black softmetal suit with the big yellow sun on her chest. On first impression, she's normally ugly like most other people in RR. Or perhaps a little less ugly. There's something bubbly in her eyes. But she looks at Bobby like she's visiting a virtual zoo and she's entered the cage of some genetic oddity.

"We're all very excited to have you in our team, Bobby," she speaks very fast. "It's not often that an escapee of Hyper-Earth Link joins the knights. From what the computers told us, you're the first one in 37 years."

"Did the last one get acclimatised well?" Bobby wants to know.

"So you can talk, already!" she seems pleasantly surprised. "No, he didn't. He died after three months of training. The knights' training is tough."

With all my mind, with all my heart.

Bobby can feel something above his head.

Szar's presence.

Warm. Gentle. Safe.

Penny seems to be noticing too. For a few seconds, she looks over Bobby's head, silently. Then she resumes the conversation, "You'll find that our choir, choir beta-omega Saint-Bernard, has extremely high standards of friendship and brotherhood. For sure we don't have the highest maruding scores of the academy. But when it comes to team spirit and transpersonal skills, we're exemplary."

"What's a high maruding score?" he asks.

"You need to be permanently stabilised above 350 to graduate as a knight, and at least seven recorded experiences above 500 in order to qualify as a fighter pilot. In choir beta-omega Saint-Bernard, no one has yet scored above 190, but there is still *plenty* of time before graduation."

That's it! They've enrolled him in the spastic squad. It was highly predictable. Mind you, knowing he himself has never scored above 78, it's probably better that way.

"Have you undergone maruding tests yourself?" Penny asks.

"Not really, no," Bobby prefers to remain vague.

"You're probably anxious to know more about our choir. We used to be eleven but five have dropped out, they couldn't cope. So now there are six of us, holding tight together. There's me, there's Molly. She's my best friend. She's a great person, very solid, always there when you need her. There's John. He's our genius, and tall and handsome on top of it. He's the one who scored 181 six weeks ago, we're still celebrating. Then there's Anna. Her name used to be Anastasia but she had to shorten it to Anna 'cause in the knights it's no good having a multisyllabic name, takes too

much time to pronounce. Same with me. I'm Penelope but everyone calls me Penny. And if you need to pass on information real fast, just say Pen, I'll get it. Now with Anna, fasten your inertial dampers, she's got real high transpersonal connections. She just has to smile upwards and zap! Your reality is flooded with light from the Archive. Then there's Paul. He's a bit slow but it's because he had a difficult childhood. But he's a good man, except he's got major traumas to get out of his system. His grandfather got killed in his computer by a magard. I've often thought that in reality, Paul carries a hell of a lot of hidden guilt. I think it's his subconscious desire for revenge that made him join the knights. Deep inside, he hates machines. The Rex is all about machines, you see. And then there's Don. He's very smart, very gay and very psychic – the kind of guy that can just take a look at a computer and tell you, 'there's a magard in there,' and he's always right. And then of course there's also Sam, my puppy. When you see him you'll have to keep in mind, he's just a puppy, even though he's nearly his adult size. Saint-Bernards are big, that's just how they are. He's such a spiritual dog – fantastic energy. And now there is you."

Boy, does she talk fast!

She immediately goes on, "I thought you'd like to know the kind of things you are going to be doing with us. As soon as you can walk... at the moment you can't walk, can you?"

Bobby isn't sure.

She takes his silence for tacit confirmation, "We'll take you to our quarters and you'll join our classes. Our training goes through phases. In the first months, we were closely supervised by Lieutenant Semper and a few other officers. But now we're in a phase of having to get organised on our own. The officers are there if we need them, but unless we call on them they won't intervene. Presently we're studying team spirit, transpersonal motivation, lots of maths, physics and engineering. And of course we have three main subjects of neurocybernetics: Point-weaving (the academy's network says you're going to be good at that), SAB structure enhancing (the basic HR training of the knights), and super-coordination (that's when you get to pilot virtual craft). And during our leisure time we're supposed to study history and HR music. We also do sports, but you don't have to do any for the moment."

Bobby has a headache.

"Now there is something else I must tell you," flash in her eyes, accomplice's smile, "according to a personality report based on seven hundred and fifty emotional intelligence parameters and various criteria derived from your biography chip, you and I should get on really well."

Ah, shit! Another psycho-hormonal perfect match. Just what Bobby needed.

"Excuse me one moment. Do you know where the toilets are?"

"No."

"Not to worry, I'll find out," she walks out of the room.

Overwhelmed, Bobby switches VRR on for a bit of fresh air. It doesn't take away the headache but still, seeing Szar immediately makes him feel better.

His brown robe shining with a touch of gold like Barkhan Seer's. Szar is standing at the back of the room. Quiet strength, smiling.

So much can pass through a smile, Bobby realises.

Bobby finds himself returning the smile. But not for long.

"This is never going to work," he exclaims, dejected.

Grin, "You mean between Penelope and you?"

"No!" he shouts. "I mean me and the knights."

"Hush, Brother Knight! It is far too early to despair."

"Brother Knight, me?" Sarcastically, "Hha! Listen, these guys have been studying and piloting for months, and *I* can't even walk! Or can I?"

Szar takes on his cool, kind-of frightening voice of superlatively stubborn bastard, "Bobby, you will be walking within seven days. I engage my word on this."

No shit. You can see in his eyes, he really means it.

Impressive. "But..."

"Bobby, do you think I became a Master of Thunder in three months? You should have seen *me* when my teacher fished me: a completely useless, unrepentant sleeper. For the first five years, I messed up *every single task* I was given."

Very reassuring.

"It doesn't have to take five years for you, Bobby. This is not Atlantis, kingdom of sleepers. This is the Apocalypse, the time when *everything* is possible."

Of course, Bobby doesn't believe this. Still, what a breath!

2.4 AR – Augmented Reality

Szar enters Bobby's reality and wakes him with a jovial voice, "Good *mor*ning Sir Bobby! Time to practise!"

Bobby jumps out of his vertical bed and stands up in front of Szar, fists clenched, Point-centred peripheral vision engaged – PCP is cool. Ready to black dance. "Good *mor*ning Sir Szar of the Hyper-Brown Robe!"

"Hunh hunh! This morning we're practising in VRR." Szar changes the reality mode and Bobby finds himself in his gravito-field again, hanging in the air.

"Want me to feel my Real Reality carcass?"

Szar comes close and takes Bobby's right hand. "Today we're moving."

Oh, no!

It *had* to happen. "Want me to hold your hand, is that it?" Bobby remembers only too well the near fatal blast of Point-vibration he triggered the last time he tried that trick.

Szar doesn't seem to be worried. "Begin with minimal strength."

A bead of sweat breaks out on Bobby's forehead. "How about black dancing a bit to warm us up," he tries to negotiate.

"Let's not make a mountain out of this. I've worked on your nervous system extensively over the last few weeks. There are some good surprises waiting for you."

"But..."

Szar takes on his cool bulldozer's voice, "*Don't think, just do it!*" Concomitantly, he throws an impulse through Bobby's Point.

Bobby sees his hand contracting, grasping Szar's hand. It hurts. Badly. But nothing like the P-bomb kind of pulsing that nuked him the last time he tried this.

"Want some pain killer?" Szar offers.

"Just a touch," Bobby catches his breath.

"Just a touch." Szar links to Bobby's medicomputer and programs a subtle drug cocktail to flow into his jugular through the catheter. That's the advantage of being a clone – you can plug into any machine and make fully informed decisions, since both you and the machine are operated by the same computer network.

The pain has already diminished by half. "That will do," Szar judges. "If I get you too stoned, we won't get anywhere this morning. Now, try again!"

"Wait! You got to tell me how this happened!" Bobby wants to know. "How come it didn't kill me?"

"*No thoughts.* Just do it!" This time, Szar doesn't manipulate Bobby's Point.

Bobby tries again. Minimal strength. His hand lightly clasps Szar's. Minimal pain. Minimal fuss.

Amazing!

They look into each other's eyes. Something passes.

Deep.

"Again!" Szar says. "See from the Point! Move from the Point!"

A little tighter.

It works!

Painful, but only in the hand, and quite bearable. The cocktail helps.

Szar takes Bobby's left hand, "Now both hands together!"

It works again! Bobby can hardly believe it. Both hands contracting at the same time. His RR carcass is responding to orders!

Szar takes his hands off. "Now, clench your fists!"

A tiny contraction of Bobby's fingers.

"Move from the Point!" Szar reminds him in a sharp voice.

From the Point, Bobby gradually closes his fists. It wouldn't be enough to black dance, but still! The cocktail helping, he feels a momentous wave of enthusiasm rising inside him, "I can do it!"

His gaze locked into Szar's, "I can do it!"

"This is called transcending the limitations of matter, Bobby. It's an essential aspect of the human adventure. Now your toes!" Szar stands up, "From the Point!"

Bobby looks at his feet. From the Point, he lightly contracts his toes. Again. And again.

"From the Point!" Szar never tires of reminding him.

Completely amazing. Bobby's body is responding, as if it were normal VR.

"Is this really happening in Real Reality?" he questions.

"Yes, but at this stage we must take a break and ponder carefully on the nuances of Virtual Reality," Szar flexes his left forearm horizontal, looks down to his fist, clenches and unclenches it. Slowly. His idiosyncratic way of signalling there's shit in the air.

Bobby totally relaxes his toes and listens carefully.

"Now that you're moving your Real Reality body," Szar warns, "you're going to have to be damn careful. There's VRR and there's AR – Augmented Reality. They look the same, but they're not the same at all."

More realities? Exciting. Perhaps.

"In VRR, people lie in a gravito-field, like you are now. It's a safe cocoon in which you can move your limbs and your body, and where gravito-waves and utility fog (nanotech stuff) simulate the appropriate effects for the scene you've chosen. Get the idea?"

"No."

Using VR, Szar conjures up the image of a woman in a horizontal gravito-field: an egg-shaped field of whitish energy, identical to the one in which Bobby's body is held. A naked woman is lying, suspended inside the egg. She's laughing. Her legs are moving fast. "That's what she looks like in Real Reality," Szar explains.

"Now, that's the VRR she perceives," Szar conjures up a second image. There the woman is no longer horizontal but vertical. And she's wearing a long yellow dress. She's laughing, running after a man. To run faster, she pulls her dress up above her knees.

"The man isn't a real person. He's a virtual clone," Szar says.

Looks very playful. It's in a meadow with lush green grass. The type of landscape the people of Hyper-Earth Link find obnoxiously boring, but Bobby likes it. Suddenly, the clone stops running and turns round. The woman throws herself into his arms. He falls on the grass with her and they start kissing on the mouth. Passionately. Meanwhile, the woman in the gravito-field is doing all the corresponding gestures.

"You realise you've never done this," Szar says.

Bobby frowns. All right, he's never been the Casanova of his virtual neighbourhood, but still! He's had virtual sex many times.

"I don't mean sex!" Szar looks up to the ceiling and sighs. "I mean VRR with your body moving."

Of course not. How could he? In Hyper-Earth Link, his RR body was kept gravito-strapped in a drawer. After that he was stuck in a transmission coffin, with at least one drain per orifice.

"Now watch this scene carefully!" Szar instructs him.

The woman and the clone are walking along a dirt path together, holding hands. The woman trips. The clone catches her in his arms so she doesn't fall down.

"Things like this work in VRR, that is, when people are in a gravito-field," Szar spells out. "They *do not* work in Augmented Reality. In AR, clones have an image, but they have no substance."

Tough one. Bobby becomes vague. "But I thought that clones never had any RR substance. I thought it was the very definition of being a clone."

"Correct, but VRR tricks your nervous system into believing clones do have substance. The imitation is perfect, you have no way of realising it's a trick. In AR, however, it's not difficult to see there's a trick. AR is very close to RR. AR is just RR with images on top of it. In AR, you're not lying in a gravito-field. You are just sitting in a RR chair or walking in a RR corridor. Images of virtual clones are superimposed on top of your RR. Get it?"

Sort of.

"Now, we're in AR," Szar says.

Bobby can't see any difference.

Clench. Unclench. Clench... then Szar throws his fist into Bobby's stomach. A massive black dancer's punch.

No blow! Bobby doesn't feel anything. Szar's fist disappears into Bobby's solar plexus, and reappears when he takes it out.

"It's like my body can't be touched by you," Bobby tries to conceptualise what this AR business is about. "Like I'm insubstantial?"

"No!" Szar hammers into him. "It's *my* AR image that's insubstantial. Your RR body is made of RR matter. RR matter *is* substantial."

Not completely clear. To Bobby, matter in VR feels just as substantial as matter in RR. Rather more substantial, actually.

"Anyhow," Szar continues in a tone of dire warning, "what it means is that when you're in RR with Augmented Reality, you must watch your ass. If you fall down, an AR clone won't be able to catch you and keep you on your feet. Get it? RR accidents are *dangerous*."

Bobby nods. Anyhow, he doesn't trust RR one single bit. "RR stinks, doesn't it?"

Szar shakes his head and exhales loudly, like Bobby is giving him a real hard time.

The door of the room opens. Bobby lies flat on his gravito-field, playing half-dead and utterly quadriplegic.

"Bobby?"

It's Dr Fawlers. Bobby sort of opens his RR right eye. She's standing by his bed, just as wrinkled as before. Szar isn't in her reality. She sees only Bobby.

"Bobby, I have received instructions from the network telling me I wasn't to do anything about the rehabilitation of your locomotor system. So my staff won't try to make you walk." After a quick pause, she asks, "You

do not have to answer this question if you don't want to but... are the Archive people taking care of you?"

Bobby closes his RR right eye again, wondering what he is supposed to say.

In AR, Szar whispers into his hear, "Come on, make her day. Say yes."

Bobby opens both RR eyes and looks at her. "Yes, they are."

An illumination on the old woman's face. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Bobby. I am... *very* happy for you."

She looks deeply moved, like she could cry.

Bobby finds himself smiling with her.

2.5 Hyper Blue Moon

"See from the Point! Move from the Point!" Szar gets Bobby's gravito-field to move from vertical to horizontal position.

A gradual movement. Bobby can't feel anything. In a gravito-field you always feel like you are lying horizontal, regardless of the angle.

"Now, sit up!"

Bobby sits up, his RR legs hanging over the edge of the gravito-field. He bends forwards, slightly.

"Careful the catheter!" Szar yells.

Bobby freezes.

Through his computer connections, Szar gets another half metre of catheter to unfurl from the wall. "It's okay, now you can move."

Bobby starts breathing again.

"From the Point!" Szar adds.

Bobby is about to get up, for the first time in his life.

For five days, he and Szar have been practising moving his RR legs while he was lying in bed. Terribly painful, like thousands of red-hot needles pricked into his muscles – thank the Almighty Network Administrator for the relief provided by drug cocktails. But the process has been going much faster than Bobby expected. According to a program he watched in Amy's encyclopedia, it can take up to years of rehab before VR potatoes move their RR limbs properly. Some 'escapees' actually never make it.

"How come you managed to make me move my RR legs in only two days?" Bobby demands an explanation.

"A triumph of neurocybernetics," Szar explains. "Ever since I started working with you, I've been hyper-awakening your locomotor system."

"Meaning?"

"While you and I were playing HR games, I was sending highly sophisticated subliminal signals to your nervous system, targetting the cerebellum and the voluntary motor areas of your cortex. The areas have been gradually awakened and made to function as if you were actually walking. And apart from that, I've used some of my healing tricks. Dragon business."

Bobby finds this Dragon business immensely interesting.

"Now, kick your legs. Left, right, left..." Szar says. "Look at them from the Point, move them from the Point!"

It's an Archive mantra: "See from the Point, move from the Point!" Szar repeats it from morning to night, "because every single movement must come from the Point." It's becoming so ingrained in Bobby's reality that he dreams about it at night. And throughout the day he finds himself doing things like coughing from the Point or farting from the Point.

Enter Penelope. "Hi! I suddenly felt like saying hello. I know it's late. Have I come at a bad time?" she stops in the doorway with a friendly smile, tentative. Being in RR, she can't see Szar. Nor hear him.

"It's me who sent her the Point-impulse to come and visit," Szar tells Bobby. "I need a RR person to hold your arm."

Bobby isn't too thrilled. "Come in."

"No personal shit!" Szar tells him off. "She's your brother knight."

Bobby returns the friendly smile. "Perfect timing, Penny! I was just about to take my first steps."

Penny raises her eyebrows, but only imperceptibly. She remains contained.

"Invite her into our AR," Szar orders.

Bobby activates a mindswitch, bringing Szar's image into Penelope's reality.

This time she raises her eyebrows higher than the ceiling. Only for one second, though. "Praise the Great Apollo, Master Szar of the Brown Robe!" Stiffness in her voice, like she's holding onto her sphincters.

"TOP' Pen," Szar says. "Come here, we need you to give us a hand."

"Yes, *sir*!" She walks towards him with her back very straight. No more smiling. She's on red alert, dead serious.

"I need you to hold Bobby's arm," Szar tells her.

"Yes, *sir*!" she immediately walks to Bobby's side.

"Put your right arm on her shoulder!" Szar tells Bobby.

She stands close to him and bends down a bit, so he can place his right RR hand around her RR neck. She grabs his right RR hand firmly. It doesn't hurt too much.

"Ready?" Szar asks.

"I don't know!" Bobby is gripped by a wave of panic. Cold sweat down his back. Visions of that stupid program about the rehab of the demented wrecks of Loggia space station – those who crawl on the floor and dribble, and will never be human beings again, as the presenter of the program repeated twice.

Penelope can feel the distress. It's abysmal. She holds his hand very tight. It hurts.

"Put your left foot on the floor. Move from the Point."

Feeling sick. Really sick.

"Do I really have to do this?"

"Don't think, just put your foot on the floor!"

Everything starts turning. Not from the Point.

"Do I *really* have to do this?"

"No you don't! Stop. Lie down!" Szar interrupts the nightmare. "Help him, Pen."

With her help, Bobby gets his RR body back into the horizontal position. Feels *so good* to be horizontal, he realises as he finds himself flat, breathing loudly.

Penelope is still holding his hand, trying her best to hold the energy for him.

Szar is looking down to his left fist, thinking deeply. Clench. Unclench... Bobby is watching him with his peripheral vision, wondering what he's going to come up with next. Bobby is starting to know this man: don't *ever* expect him to give up.

Unclench. Clench. "Pen," he calls.

She swivels to face him, "Yes, *sir*!" Stiff voice. Her back very straight.

"Do you like music?"

She blinks twice, mouth open. In a softer voice, "Yes, sir."

"Do you play music Pen?"

"Yes, sir. Music is part of our training in neurocybernetics."

"Tss, tss!" Szar shakes his head with an air of reprobation. "It's neurocybernetics that's part of music, Pen! Not the other way round."

She smiles. It's evidently a joke, but Bobby doesn't get it.

"Play something for us, Pen."

"Yes, sir."

Bobby is interested. He listens carefully, but nothing happens.

"Not bad, not bad," Szar says after a few seconds of silence.

Bobby is starting to feel left out.

"It's flatlined music. For Point-connoisseurs. You can't hear any sounds, but your Point recognises the harmonies," Szar explains. "That's if your Point is awakened enough, of course."

Bobby does his best to Point-listen.

"Do you like it?"

Bobby can't feel a damn thing. "It's... subtle. Anyhow, I've never liked music."

Appalled, Penny looks at him like he's said something really heartbreaking. She lets go of his hand.

Bobby can feel there is something very wrong going on. He has no idea!

She feels she's been betrayed by technology. How could the computer *dare* imply a woman like her has *anything* in common with a man who shamelessly declares, "I've never liked music."

"It's all right! It's all right!" Szar comes to Bobby's rescue. "The music of Hyper-Earth Link is stuffed with the HR of the Rex: subliminal crap that gunks your head. It's designed to make your nervous system dull – the very opposite of hyper-awakening. The more you listen to it, the more spiritually disconnected you become."

"But that's terrible!" Penny is horrified. Flash of compassion in her eyes, like she really feels for that poor monster.

Bobby enjoys the sweetness but he has mixed feelings about being regarded as a genetic oddity.

"Let's look on the bright side!" Szar grins. "Tonight is the first night of your new musical life, Bobby! Let's go virtual and get out of here," he decides, switching on free-style VR mode and walking through the wall. "Follow me!"

It sounds like an order, so Penny jumps up, "Yes, *sir*!" she runs after him.

Bobby gets out of his gravito-field and follows them. But why is it so hard to walk in RR when it's so easy in VR? He wonders.

They walk down a stone staircase into a small basement with a large brown cupboard and a stool in front of it.

"Have you ever played the piano, Pen?" Szar asks, sitting on the stool.

"No, sir. But I love it."

Szar opens a kind of drawer in the middle of the cupboard, uncovering a low row of keys, mainly white. Not unlike those antique mindboards that people used to operate with their hands – keyboards, they were called.

Szar starts making sounds, singing at the same time, "Poom, poom-poom, poom-poom, poom-poom..." Very rhythmical. "Have you ever heard this kind of music, Pen?"

She stifles a smile. "Yes, of course. A form of primordial jazz called boo-something."

"Boogie-woogie. Honky tonk." Szar really gets into it. Much louder sounds coming out of the cupboard. "Come on, Pen, give me the beat!"

Penelope finds herself beating her foot and clapping her hands, eyes wide open, laughing with amazement. Is this virtually happening – a real Archive hyper-clone, emanation of Szar of the Brown Robe, Master of Thunder, playing wild boogie-woogie?

Szar winks at her. "It's the Apocalypse!"

The time when everything is possible.

She really gets into it too. "Come on Bobby! The beat!"

"With your foot!" Szar says.

Penelope shows Bobby how to do it.

Bobby isn't too sure about the music, but he likes the atmosphere in the room. An interesting psycho-stimulant drug with mild endorphinic effects, and probably a serotonin-like effect too.

"You don't have to like this kind of music," Szar tells him. "Just let it get into your system, and you won't be able to live without it."

A dangerous drug? Bobby doesn't mind. He keeps accompanying with a steady beat of his foot.

Szar starts another tune. "Ever heard that, Pen?"

"No, sir."

"I used to play it all the time in one of my past lives."

Penelope frowns, "Do you mean they had pianos in Atlantis?"

"No, no, a post-Atlantean life. It was during World War 2. Boy, this tune got me into *a lot* of trouble!" And he starts singing, "*Blue Moon, there's a dream in the air...* Come on, dance!" Szar activates a VR subprogram, and Penelope and Bobby find themselves holding hands, dancing in the small room. The prog takes care of all movements for them, all they have to do is watch themselves dance.

"It's called Blue Moon," Szar says, and he keeps singing, "*Blue Moon... you read my heart...*"

Powerful drug, man! Penelope is overcome by uncontrollable waves of laughter. "I just can't believe this!" she tells Bobby. "My first close encounter with a Master of Thunder and here I am, dancing primordial jazz music."

"Usually, with me he does black dance, not jazz dance," Bobby tells her.

She doesn't get it but she doesn't worry and keeps on dancing. Bobby dances with her. It's one of those subprograms where you don't have to worry about doing anything. Your body is made to move just like you're supposed to.

There is something about Penny when she laughs, something fresh about her joy. Heart-warming (whatever that word may mean). But then again it might be the effect of the drug.

Who cares? Let's dance. When the tune is finished, Szar plays another one. And another one. Back to *Blue Moon*. And another one... What Bobby doesn't realise at the time is that through the VR sound signals, Szar is hyper-awakening a taste for primordial jazz in his brain circuitry.

Many *Blue Moons* later, Szar stops the sound, stands up and closes the brown cupboard. "That's it for tonight, friends. Pen, can you come back tomorrow morning?"

No more laughing. She's back to stiff mode. "What time, sir?"

"Eight hundred hours."

"I have duties to fulfil, sir."

"I'll send a message to Lieutenant Semper, saying the Archive people need you for a special assignment. That will free your morning."

Half a second of flutter in her eyes. Then, "Yes, *sir*!"

"I'll see you tomorrow morning. Good night," he salutes them and instantly disappears – a clear-cut way out.

"Fffff...!" Penelope exhales a loud, long sigh. "Is he always like that?"

"Not really, no."

"Oh, God! I don't feel tired at all! Do you?"

"Yes, very," Bobby answers. And it's the truth. "Good night, Penny. Thanks for your help."

2.6 Jazzed up and running

07:59:56, Titan time. Three knocks on the door of the hospital room.

"I like people with a serious sense of time," Szar nods, appreciative. "Come in, Pen!"

When she walks in, she has a pleasant surprise. Bobby is lying on his bed, but he is no longer dressed in pyjamas. He now wears the black soft-metal suit, with the large yellow disc covering his chest. But Bobby remains very cool, welcoming her, "Good *mor*ning Penny! How *are* you today?"

"Yes, how was your night, Pen?" Szar asks, smiling, a touch mischievous.

What a night! She's been dreaming non-stop and loud, going from mad tempos of ancient jazz piano to dancing with savage jungle rhythms, wild instincts shaking her belly and the *Blue Moon* theme returning every five minutes. "It was... interesting, sir."

Bobby can still feel the spirit of last evening in the air. "Shall we start again?" he jokes.

"By all means!" In AR, Szar makes the walls disappear, turning the tiny room into a hall, at least twenty times larger, and dimly lit. He walks to a strange thing as big as half a dozen transmission coffins laid side by side. He sits behind it and announces, "This is called a grand piano, Bobby. It's actually the virtual replica of one I used in a past life. It was on Earth, in a country called Germany." And he starts playing *Blue Moon*, this time without singing.

Penny immediately gets it. She walks to Bobby and extends her hand.

"Hey, you must be joking!" Bobby protests. "This is AR! I'm in my RR body. You don't expect me to dance, do you?"

"Of course not!" she takes his hand. "Just sit on the edge of the bed and beat the rhythm."

Magnificent piano sounds. Much nicer instrument than the one he used yesterday. Makes Penny shiver. It wouldn't be hard for the magic of the night to take over again! While Bobby is sitting up, she is already half-dancing.

Hyper-bewitched by *Blue Moon*, he too has been dreaming jazz all night, as she can Point-read in his energy. Using a mindswitch she lowers the gravito-field a little, so Bobby's black boots touch the floor. He no longer has a tube plugged into his jugular. His hand is moist, and cold. She tries to make hers warmer and pulls him gently until he is half-standing, half-sitting on the edge of the gravito-field.

Meanwhile, something profound is happening in Bobby's brain. The subliminal HR signals of the jazz party have been working on him all night. Now that the music is starting again, it triggers a chain reaction. He can't exactly tell what he is feeling, but it's massive.

Massive!

"I think I can stand," he decides.

Holding onto Penelope's hand, he pulls himself forward a little bit, away from the gravito-field.

She stops and looks at him, amazed, tears in her eyes.

He is standing. His RR legs are holding fast.

From the other side of the hall, Szar is watching too, biting his lip. He keeps playing *Blue Moon*.

"So what? I'm just standing on my feet. Big deal!" the young man says. "Why don't you keep dancing?"

She bursts out laughing and she resumes her half-dancing, trying to copy the movements of the subprogram in the basement last night but holding Bobby's hand extremely delicately, making sure she doesn't pull him.

"I think I could even dance!" he says, carried away by the music. "But I won't!" he immediately adds. Wisely, he just beats the rhythm with his foot and moves his arm to help Penny turn around, as in the jazz prog.

"This is mad!" Penelope can't stop laughing, and she becomes a bit more daring in her movements. "Bobby, you and your friend are great fun to be with!"

He likes to see her laugh. She's a lovely person, in a way. Fresh. Warm. Shame she's so ordinary.

Truly, there's only one Panther.

Abruptly, Penny stops dancing.

The music stops.

Someone is standing in front of them. They didn't notice her coming in.

It's Dr Fawlers, and she has difficulty believing her real eyes. VR-potato Bobby Elmian, whose rehabilitation was expected to be long, difficult and particularly painful, is standing in front of her, dressed like a knight and holding the hand of a lovely brunette who, just a few seconds ago, was dancing plock and roll (or so it seemed to Dr Fawlers). Is it really RR?

"Hello, Dr Fawlers!" Bobby says, a touch of hesitation in his voice.

She opens her mouth but doesn't say anything.

Remembering what he learnt in his tutorials about real people's etiquette, Bobby tries, "Penny, this is Dr Fawlers. Dr Fawlers, this is Penelope."

"Hello Dr Fawlers," Penelope greets her with a polite nod.

Still no answer. Dr Fawlers looks unvirtually shocked.

Bobby feels he has to comfort her. Evidently, she needs an explanation. "This is the Apocalypse," he tells her, "the time when everything is possible." He still doesn't really believe it, but it feels like the right thing to say.

Szar, who finds the situation immensely amusing, takes the unilateral decision to switch Dr Fawlers into their AR.

For Dr Fawlers, the light goes down, the room turns into a large hall with a piano playing behind her and someone whistling a tune she heard once, long ago. She turns, and guess who's whistling?

A Brown Robe monk playing the grand piano. She can't see his face, it's covered by a hood.

"He's playing our favourite tune," Bobby informs her. "It's called *Blue Moon*. Do you like it?"

There is an air of awe on Dr Fawler's face. A light. It makes her beautiful, despite her RR body. RR tears rolling down her face, she nods, "Yes, I like it. It's things like this that make life worth living."

2.7 On wheels

"Let's not waste one minute!" Penny has decided Bobby must *immediately* join the quarters of the beta-omega Saint-Bernard choir. Szar agreed, and Dr Fawlers preferred to be left out of the decision process. She just told Bobby, "As to your pancreas, don't worry, I'll link to your medicomputer and monitor everything from a distance." And she gave him a lengthy list of recommendations which left him rather worried. Meanwhile, not wasting one minute, Penny had already organised a self-propelled, mind-board-activated vehicle made of a large comfortable seat – a lavish armchair with thick black cushions – fitted with a small electric engine activating four one-foot-diameter wheels, hence the name of the vehicle: a wheelchair. That's how Bobby finds himself rolling along the corridors of TS5, whistling *Blue Moon*, Penelope trotting by his side.

Relatively narrow corridors, twenty-five metres wide at the most, with *hundreds* of busy-looking people wearing suits of various colours and walking fast. And no one else in a wheelchair.

An oppressive feeling in Bobby's chest.

He has difficulty believing his eyes. "Are they all real people?"

Penelope chuckles, "Of course they're real! Why would virtual clones want to use the corridors? To go from one place to another, they can just switch themselves off and on."

Of course.

It only takes ten minutes to reach the quarters of the beta-omega choir. Much narrower corridors, nearly empty, which makes it easier to breathe. Of course there are no windows – TS5 is located 300 metres below Titan's surface.

"Here is cabin 4-17-201. Your cabin!" Penelope announces.

A narrow opening appears in the wall, leading into an empty room, three metres by three, with only a thick mattress on the floor. "This was Molly's cabin but she's agreed to move, so now you're sandwiched between her and me (I'm 4-17-202)," Penelope explains. "Was nice of Paul to vacate cabin 4-17-200 for her. Anyway, he wanted to move to 4-17-196 (the one adjacent to Don), which I think will be great for him because after reflection I really don't think his problems are entirely due to his longing for revenge after the magard killed his relative but also to repressed homosexual tendencies. If you ask me, the best thing that could happen to him would be to have an affair with Don. You'll meet him soon, so you can tell me what you think. Now what do I need to tell you about this cabin? Only two things. One, the pillow on your mattress is a welcome present from the choir. It is made of *real* feathers of genetically engineered GG337 green goose – have sweet dreams! Two, the gravito-field unit is there," she points

to the back of the cabin. It's empty. "You know how to activate it, don't you?"

"No."

"You've never used a gravito-field before you arrived on Titan!" She looks at him with great tenderness, deeply moved.

There *is* something about her softness. Nothing like the Panther's, of course. Still, she can be special. When she stops talking.

"I'll show you. It's just like the one at the hospital." Using a mindswitch, she makes a two-metre-long opalescent gravito-field appear at the back of the cabin. It's in the horizontal position. "All you have to do is lie inside it!" To demonstrate, she walks close to the gravito-field and lets herself fall backwards into it. The device catches her and makes her land smoothly in the middle of the translucent cocoon of energy. "Then you just let the gravito-field take your clothes off."

No demonstration of this part. Penny gets up. "Your turn!"

She takes his arm and helps him stand up. A hesitant step. And another one. A third one.

"Beautiful!" she says in a motherly voice. "It does something to me to see you walk, you know." And she means it, Bobby can tell.

One more step and she gently pushes Bobby into the arms of the gravito-field. The field instantly catches him and arranges a friendly deceleration curve, his weight evenly distributed on what seems like an infinitely flexible pad.

"Cosy enough?" she inquires.

"As comfortable as RR can be!" Which doesn't say much.

"As long as your walking is hesitant, it might be wise to hang in there and do everything through VRR," Penelope advises.

Szar has recommended the same thing.

"Now if we hurry up," she says, "we should make it to the end of the class of transpersonal motivation. It's a great class. Normally, it must take place in RR, but the choir has agreed we'll hold them in VRR for as long as you find it difficult to walk. I'll pick you up. See you in a minute," she turns round and walks out, the door silently gliding closed behind her.

Bobby lets the gravito-field take his clothes off. So effortless that it's hardly perceptible. The softmetal suit and the boots fall to the floor.

The door opens again. Enters Szar of the Brown Robe.

Bobby mindswitches his gravito-field into the vertical position, facing Szar. While the cocoon is moving, he questions, "Why do you come through the door since you're a clone?"

"Classy clones do things like that."

Yeah, he *has* class. "Do you like my new transmission coffin?"

"You unappreciative bastard!" Szar laughs. "This is a luxurious apartment, not a coffin! What do you think? This is TS5-on-Titan, not the world of the gods."

"Sorry! So what do I do now?"

"Let your choir take care of you, and keep cool when you can't follow. Remember, Hyper Reality is the central part of the training. Many tasks which may seem impossible to you will become routine after HR has worked on you."

"Sounds cool. When am I going to see the Black Panther again?"

"Some good news for you: in the coming weeks the Panther will have to cross the blockade for a mission. She'll be in the vicinity of Titan. She said she'd VR-liaise with you to give you your first flying lesson. For the knights, the first flying lesson is like a ritual."

"Ah? Well, that's... virtually nice of her." Sigh.

"Ah..." Szar echoes the sigh, but longer and louder, "what would we do without the Panther?"

It forces a smile out of Bobby. "Szar, there is something I wanted to ask you. Does it do something to your immortal Spirit if I say thank you?"

"How could I know?" Szar smiles. "You've never tried."

Fathomless irony in his smile. Yeah, he definitely has class.

2.8 Life purpose, first episode

"What about you, Paul?" John asks. He's the MC. An MC is a facilitator – the Master of Ceremonies.

"I'm afraid..." Paul scratches his head. Extremely short hair, highlighting the pear-like shape of his head. "I'm afraid I have to stick to what I said last week: my life purpose is to fight the Rex. Even though... I *know* there must be something more specific. But what? It's a mystery to me! Now, coming to my central motivational thread, I *really* want to become a knight, that's what keeps me going minute after minute. And for the main driving forces... I want to screw all the girls of the academy." Silence.

"Anything else?" the MC asks.

"No, I can't see myself screwing anything else."

They all laugh.

"Anna?" John says.

She's beautiful. Not physically, of course – it's VRR. But there is a spark in her eyes that makes you forget the rough cut of her face (it's not that the nose is ugly, it's that it doesn't fit her size) and the scruffy look of her half-long, half-bleached sort-of-blond hair. Quite sexy in her own way, Bobby finds.

"It's getting clearer and clearer," Anna declares. "My life purpose: to serve the White Eagle. My central motivational thread: to serve the White Eagle. Driving force: the White Eagle's presence."

Everyone waits patiently for her to go on.

"That's it!" she announces.

Don and Molly aren't buying into it. "Too simple! There can't just be the White Eagle and nothing else." Don objects.

"And what if she's a mystic?" Paul argues. "There've always been mystics among the knights, haven't there?"

Bobby wonders what a mystic is. There were none in Hyper-Earth Link. Yet another disease?

"A mystic is kind of like a saint," Pen clarifies for him.

"A saint?" There were none in HEL either.

"Someone who never has virtual sex," Paul says.

"Someone who wants to save humanity." Pen adds.

Now, *that* sounds like a dangerous disease!

Molly doesn't let Anna off the hook. "There must be other things you're not looking at."

"But fuck!" the mystic defends herself. "If that's what works for me..."

"Yeah, precisely!" Molly pursues. "How about a good fuck?"

"Each time I fuck I end up flooded with so much white light I can't even feel my body. So what's the point of fucking? I might as well meditate."

"Now, that's really being a mystic!" Paul says in a tone of conviction.

It looks like they've all spoken and now they are turning towards Bobby.

High anxiety.

What's he going to tell them? That the thing he'd want the most in the universe would be to spend just a bit of time with the Panther, who is the most beautiful person he's ever met, all virtualities included, but who – Oh misfortune! Oh cruel destiny! – happens to be married to the reincarnation of his best friend.

"Now Bobby, it's probably much too early to talk of life purpose," John says, to Bobby's immense relief. "But will you tell us why you joined the knights?"

"I got no idea, man. I'd never heard about all this biz until Barkhan Seer abducted me from APHELION. After that, he and Szar of the Brown Robe used blackmail: it was either TS5 or the spastic rehabilitation centre of Loggia upon Neptune. I chose TS5."

They all burst out laughing and clap their hands. Under the table, the dog beats Bobby's legs with his tail.

And they keep on laughing, as if Bobby had released some silly drug in their reality.

"Don't worry," Molly feels the need to reassure him, "it's just that we've been working really hard lately."

"We're a happy choir!" Paul adds.

When he can recover the use of speech, John comments, "Fished by the Brown Robe, as in the early days of the knights of the Apocalypse. And by Master Barkhan Seer himself, moreover – congratulations Bobby!"

"If they bothered abducting you from Hyper-Earth Link," Paul starts saying, "you must really be a special..." he stops short, shocked, like someone has kicked him under the table.

Molly takes Bobby's arm. "We're honoured that you have been enrolled in our choir, Bobby."

"The man needs to be warned, though," Don tells his friends. "As you understand, Bobby, our choir is not exactly representative of TS5's hyper-standards. Did they explain to you what beta-omega stands for?"

"Hunh hunh!"

"The choirs..." John clears his voice, "the choirs are graded from alpha-alpha to beta-omega."

The Greek alphabet is no mystery to Bobby, who is a virtual archaeology enthusiast. "Are there no gamma choirs?" he asks.

"No!" they all say in one voice.

2.9 Hyper-drills

After the class on transpersonal motivation, the choir is to transport itself to the shooting ground for a session of hyper-drills.

"We'll take you, it's just around the corner," Molly tells Bobby. She and Penny each grab one of Bobby's arms and they hold him as he walks. The dog follows, sniffing Bobby's ass.

"Sam, don't do that!" Penny yells at him.

The dog keeps sniffing Bobby's ass.

It's Bobby's first real attempt at VRR walking. The short corridor looks like it's five kilometres long. Each and every step must be earned – in the gravito field, Bobby's RR legs must move for his VRR body to move in the corridor. It's not as painful as in the beginning, but it's exhausting. Out of breath, he has to take a break in the middle.

"That's plenty for the moment!" Penelope decides, and instead of painstakingly walking the rest of the corridor they VRR switch themselves into the shooting ground, direct. Conveniently, Bobby finds himself in a massive gravito-armchair with heavenly gravito-cushions that exactly match the form of his body, and on which he can lie more or less horizontal.

In VRR, armchairs are fantastic, Bobby is discovering. Must be the same in RR.

The shooting ground is a dark empty space. Bobby can only guess Penelope's silhouette.

"Where is Sam?" he wonders.

"Waiting outside. Dogs are not allowed in the shooting ground." She comes close to him, puts her hand on his right shoulder and whispers in his ear, "Are you coping?"

"So far so good," he says, grossly exaggerating.

"You're going to love these hyper drills. They're magnificent."

Molly comes to take position on Bobby's left. Bobby can't see if she's standing or lying on an armchair like him. "I'll take MC-ship. We'll start with Fireflies, triangular Point formation, individual targets, Bobby and Pen Point-paired," she announces in a stiff voice. For Bobby, she explains, "Pen, you and I are connecting our Points, but we'll have separate hyper-realities. You and Pen will share a reality."

Penny stays close to Bobby, her hand on his neck, her lips half touching his ear. Feels nice. "We're starting," she says.

The semi-darkness turns pitch-black. Can't see a thing, can't feel a thing, apart from Penny's light breath on his ear.

"Look to your left, there's a tiny blue dot coming towards you."

As soon as Bobby notices it, the dot turns orange-red. Beautiful colour. Shining like a little star.

"To your right!"

Another dark-blue dot moving towards him. Slowly. Same as before: as soon as Bobby looks at it, it turns orange-red.

"It's all you have to do – see them!" Pen whispers.

Then the computer starts sending dozens of blue dots all at once. Bobby has to move his eyes super-fast to turn all of them red. Once red, they keep drifting in his direction. Some pass through his body, others move to his side, and then they disappear behind him. As Bobby goes on, the computer sends more and more blue dots, so many that it soon becomes impossible to turn all of them red. A steady percentage manages to pass by and remain blue.

"Do you know about Point-Centred Peripheral vision?" Penny inquires.

"Of course!" PCP is Bobby's favourite Point-vision mode.

"So, engage your PCP and instead of moving your eyes, simply acknowledge each blue dot from your Point. You'll be much faster. Having to move your eyes slows you down heaps."

Bobby makes himself very still, focussed in the Point above his head, comprehending the whole space in front of him with his vision. But seeing a whole cloud of blue dots at once isn't enough to turn them red. Each and every dot must be acknowledged individually.

"The art of peripheral vision is to look without looking," Pen reminds him. And it's exactly what he has to do: see each dot without looking at it, sending a slight impulse of consciousness from his Point.

From his PCP, Bobby manages to turn many more dots red. But the computer notices his progress and starts sending him twice as many dots, and much faster. Clouds of blue dots.

Bobby tries to match them with higher intensity in his Point, but with only moderate success. The mental effort creates a feeling of slight exhilaration. "That's mad!" he laughs.

After two or three minutes, Pen decides, "Break!" stopping the flow of blue dots. "Fireflies is an extremely powerful hyper-program," she explains while the myriads of coloured little stars are vanishing, gradually restoring full darkness. He hears her voice but can no longer see her. "While you're practising, the computer analyses the way you are scoring, mapping weaknesses in your nervous system. And then it sends you subliminal hypersignals accordingly. It's one of the fastest ways of building your superastral body."

"What's the superastral body?"

"The part of your consciousness that can manifest supermind. Maruding is operated from the superastral body, which we call the SAB."

"Building the SAB," Bobby ponders. "So is this what we are doing at the moment?"

"Of course! Let's go baba," Pen decides. She stands up. "Know what 'baba' means?"

"No."

"Knights' jargon for 'going back to basics'," she starts pacing around his gravito-armchair. "The essential purpose of neurocybernetics is to build the superastral body. All these smart algorithms that are encoded in HR subliminal signals, that's what they're supposed to achieve: awaken structure in your nervous system, your Point and your superastral body."

Not completely clear, but Bobby gets the general idea. "Did I get a score for this exercise?"

The computer answers in a soft, measured female voice, "Bobby Elmian, first Firefly score: 476."

"Is it any good?

"Ah, don't worry," Penny says, "it's just a beginning."

He is curious. "Want to show me how you do it?"

"Sure."

He hears her move and take position by his side. Exploring with his right hand, he meets her shoulder. She must be sitting on the floor.

"Want the chair?" he offers.

"No thanks, I need to keep my back straight. Tune into my Point. We're Point-paired, meaning you're supposed to support me from the Point."

He takes his hand off and Point-concentrates on her Point. No particular perception. Anyway, ever since he first met her he has been tuning into her Point. It's the way he connects with people, automatically.

A cloud of blue dots appears and starts moving towards Penny, illuminating her silhouette. Five seconds later, everything has turned red. Clearly, she beats the machine – as soon as blue dots appear she reds them dead. Strange method, though. She shoots in all directions, as if randomly, rather than wiping them out area by area. It goes on like this for half a minute, then the computer finds its second breath and thickens the galaxy-like clouds, doubling the density of spots. Penny can no longer turn them red as soon as they are born, but she is still coping. Amazing! Hardly a hundred blue spots escape her out of thousands. The blue clouds are appearing faster and faster.

Bobby can feel tension in his friend's Point.

Poor thing! With all she's withstanding at the moment, no wonder.

Filled with sincere admiration, Bobby sends her some warmth. From Point to Point. Warmth like Szar's and Barkhan Seer's. Nice.

The tension fades.

Little Penny is fighting like a panther. No, not like a panther. But still, pretty impressive. Relentless, she keeps sending full-speed volleys of Point-acknowledgment impulses, turning blue myriads into red ones.

"Break!" she finally yells. "Bobby, what were you doing to me?"

"Er... I'm sorry, I..."

"Bobby don't! It was fantastic! Fantastic! Score?"

"Penelope Heinzel beats her own record," the classy computer voice answers. "Scoring 24,877."

What? 24,877? Oh, shit!

Dejection. *Profound* dejection.

"Wahoo! Wahoo! Wahoo!" she's clapping her hands and making loud noises, dancing with joy.

Galloping noise, like a horse.

"Sam, what are you doing in here?" Pen shouts. "Someone must have left the door open. Yes, I love you. Aaahh!" high-pitched scream.

Noise of someone falling on the floor.

Bobby finally finds a mindswitch to activate a light. There she is, lying on her back on the floor laughing, with the hairy monster licking her face, strings of saliva drooling from his mouth.

"Even though he's big, he's just a puppy," she reminds Bobby. "He doesn't understand that when he stands with his forelegs resting on someone's shoulders, they can't withstand his weight. It's one of the problems with Saint-Bernards."

As if to demonstrate, Sam playfully jumps up and down. His front paws accidentally land on Bobby's stomach.

A massive blow. It takes Bobby's breath away.

Using a mindswitch, he immediately disconnects the VRR. He finds himself gasping in his gravito-field, resting on a translucent gravito-surface that imitates exactly the shape of the armchair he was on.

Shit. That hurts. That *really* hurts!

"Medicomputer! Send me a cocktail, quick!"

Two minutes later, the door opens and Pen rushes in, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

She finds Bobby dozing. "Are you all right?"

He's too stoned to answer.

"Medicomputer, diagnosis!" she yells.

"Right ribs 9 and 10 are broken. No other major injury apart from bruises."

"Shit! Shit!" she hates herself. "How could I forget to check that the more-real-than-real shock stimulator special effect unit was turned off!"

2.10 Shooting ground blues

Firefly is much more difficult in pairs than on your own. The computer sends you twice as many blue dots. The difficulty is, who shoots which dot? If you bungle it, you and your partner shoot the same dots twice, which wastes precious time and results in gamma scores. Of course, you could be tempted to make a deal in the line, "I take the dots on the left, you take the dots on the right." Maybe you'll process a fair measure of blue dots, but the computer won't be fooled. It will give you a Point-Paired Maruding Score of zero or zero plus. You get the plus if you kiss your partner

on the cheek at the end to pump up their morale. With that score, they'll need it.

"So how da hell are you supposed to do it?" Bobby wonders, observing Don and Molly while they're turning the oncoming clouds of blue dots into red ones. These two work together smoothly, it's a pleasure to watch. When they combine their Points, they create a harmony which Bobby finds Point-warming, like there is heart in the centre above his head. It makes it really easy for him to back their Points – Barkhan Seer's golden warmth flows joyfully and effortlessly.

"But how do they know who's supposed to shoot what?" he whispers to Penny.

"Point-knowingness: don't do, let the Point do! At the moment, they're doing extraordinarily well."

"How d'you know? Can you count all these fucking dots as they go?"

"Listen, at the moment you're not supposed to chat, you're supposed to fucking concentrate. It's the Apocalypse – you gotta give your best!"

"Sorry!"

They've asked him to send *as much* Point-power as he can to support them, but they don't know what they're talking about. A few times, when he was playing that combro-fissor biz, Bobby nearly terminated himself by handling high Point-voltage inconsiderately. Point-power must be used gently, and with heart.

So Bobby just waits patiently, keeping his mouth shut, admiring the wonderful harmony between these two human beings (another name for RR people), droplets of Barkhan Seer's liquid gold trickling from his Point to theirs.

"Break!" Molly shouts, ending the blue tide. She brings a dim light back into the shooting ground and exchanges a glance with Don, whose long hair is tied in a ponytail.

Such depth in that glance, like they're exchanging a hyper-library of feelings in one second. Makes Bobby envious.

Molly inhales a deep breath. "Score?"

"Molly Beth scores 21,723. Don Peran scores 26,699, beating his own record by 723 points. Point-Paired Maruding Score 182, beating the choir's former record, 166, held by John Scavenger and Anastasia Lowell," the computer announces.

Not a word. Not a ripple on their face. They just look at each other, perfectly composed. Except for the voltage in their eyes.

"Aren't they happy?" Bobby asks Penelope.

"Yes, very. But they're not supposed to react," she explains. "It's a fundamental principle of the knights: you react, you die!"

Bobby frowns, wondering why Penny was dancing with joy when she learnt she had beaten her own record the day before.

"Yeah, I know, I know... I forgot," she says.

Molly and Don stifle a smile.

Don walks towards Bobby's armchair, "We'll do the post-mortem later. For now, who would you like to practise with?"

Throughout the morning, Bobby has been fireflying with great application, sometimes alone, sometimes in duo with Pen, always with abysmal scores. He hasn't been able to reproduce his personal best (476) once.

"Give it a go with him!" Penny suggests.

"Okay."

Don comes and sits in an armchair close to Bobby's, but instead of lying down like Bobby he adjusts the back so he can sit extremely straight.

"Do you think it would work better if I sat straight?" Bobby asks.

"Oh... yeah, of course. Always. But what about your ribs?"

"Not a worry. The gravito-field holds them fixed," Bobby adjusts his armchair. It's VRR: in his cabin the gravito-field adjusts his RR body accordingly, making him sit with his back straight.

"Feel the difference?" Don asks.

"Nothing obvious."

"I take MC-ship," Don decides. "Engage Point-pairing."

That's when Bobby is supposed to let his Point resonate with Don's. A nice Point. Gentle. Bobby feels quite comfortable linking to him.

"Firefly!" Don invokes the hyper-program. Galaxies of blue dots start moving in their direction.

Don't do, let the Point do... the principle is clear. It's the practical side that's sticky. Bobby holds on to his PCP and starts shooting. Hundreds of fast little movements from the Point, looking without looking, just a stereoscopic orientation of awareness.

Don is virtually getting into it, Bobby can feel it in their combined Pointness. It creates an elation that makes Bobby feel on top of the world. Surfing on the high spirit he starts shooting even faster. In the Point, it's like ice is melting under sunshine. The computer responds, and with a vengeance. A ferocious blue storm is unleashed, flooding the two knights with blue light. The two knights don't let themselves be overwhelmed. They hold onto their Points, cool, and not discouraged a bit, stereoscoping back at this monstrous supercomputer. It's wild, like going beyond all limits, supermind over machine. Don surpasses himself. There is liquid golden brotherhood in the paired Points. Brotherhood means friendship with will (it's a saying of the knights). It's the Apocalypse, the time when everything is possible. Bobby feels alive.

"Break!" MC Don interrupts the firefly.

Bobby sort of smiles, but he remains very contained, like he isn't going to make a fuss of this success. Knights don't make a fuss of their successes. Of course not – you react, you die!

"Score?" Don asks, Bobby smiling a little more, but very contained.

"Bobby Elmian scores 311. Don Peran scores 22,321. Point-Paired Maruding Score: 41."

Oh...

"Okay, we move!" Pen grabs Bobby by the hand and pulls him out of his armchair without any respect for his broken ribs. "I gotta show you White Line. Know about White Line? Of course not. Now listen, it's the most beautiful, fantastic hyper-program you've ever seen. One of the most simple, and yet the most advanced at the same time. White Line! I could practise it from morning to night, that's if I hadn't anything else to do, of course. Okay see you guys!" she waves at Don and Molly, and she switches on a separate reality with just Bobby and her.

A dark empty space lit with a touch of diffused purple light.

"Sit down on the floor," she pulls him down and sits cross-legged by his side. "I love sitting cross-legged. It's Anna who showed me. It's a bit uncomfortable in the beginning but there is a way to program your medicomputer so you gain flexibility in your hips and your knees (I mean your RR legs, of course). I'm not sure how it works exactly, must be on the molecular level, in your tendons, something to do with RNA. In a matter of weeks you can sit in lotus posture, real comfortable, and then it's great – you sit with your back perfectly straight, effortlessly. I'll try to show you how to activate the program in your gravito-field. Now..." she passes her hand over his cheek and pauses for at least 1.5 seconds, giving him a look. A tender look. "Are you all right?"

"No."

"What do you expect? It's only day 2. It's perfectly normal..."

"No it's not day 2! I've been practising hyper-games with Szar for weeks," Bobby reminds her. "There's gotta be something wrong with me."

Her hand on his cheek feels nice.

"It's likely to be the missing link in your astral body," she suggests.

"Astral body?"

"A term of neurocybernetics referring to the mind. The superastral body is the vehicle of supermind, the astral body is the vehicle of the mind. You have to start watching your theory programs, Bobby! Anyhow, your Point is extremely strong. It's no coincidence if Don and I have pulverised records when Point-held by you."

"What good does it do me if you beat your records resting on my Point?"

"You selfish little jellybean!" she pulls him onto the floor, his head resting on her lap. "You stay here. I don't want to hear any more whingeing," she places both hands on his head. Extremely softly. "Now, look, this is the White Line." Above them, a hair-thin golden thread has appeared. "You don't do anything, you just stick to my reality. The rule of the game is extremely simple: all I have to do is ascend along the line."

She's right, there is something special about that line, like it carries some of Barkhan Seer's goldness.

"To move up, you use the power of the Point," Penny explains.

Following her reality, Bobby finds himself ascending along the thin thread.

"That's all there is to it. You move up."

An extremely fast motion, it seems. Curious, because there are no reference points. But after only a few seconds, it feels like they are gliding in high spaces, the line stretching ad infinitum above and below them.

A curious space with an exceptional feeling of vastness.

"Oops! I lost it." Pen exclaims.

They're back in the purple space which, by contrast, feels ordinary and boring. There is still a golden thread, but it's above them.

"Score?"

"Penelope Heinzel scores 56."

"Horror! Ffff... Let's try again. It will work better with your back straight," she suggests.

"What made you lose it?" Bobby asks, sitting up.

"The higher up you go, the more difficult it becomes to hold the verticality."

"Can I try?"

"No, just Point-piggy-back on my reality," she re-engages the ascension.

The ascending verticality conveys a magnificent Point-feeling of vastness. Massive, like the entire solar system wouldn't be vast enough to contain it. Clean, like none of the filth of the world has ever existed. Exhilarating, like you could start dancing. No, you *are* dancing.

Bobby's head has turned into a spiral galaxy. There's a woman dancing in the stars. He can't see her face but he knows she is smiling. At him.

With all her heart. With all her mind.

Is she the Panther? Her presence is so much like Szar's.

Gigantic blue clouds.

You haven't forgotten my name. You will find me.

Penelope breaks, "Score!"

Already?

Now, where's above and where's below? Bobby remembers the game has to do with verticality. For the moment he is floating. Somewhere. Somewhen. Blue ad infinitum. It seems to take an eternity before the muffled computer voice announces, "Penelope Heinzel scores 302."

"Wow!" Penelope holds him a little tighter in her arms.

This is when Bobby realises that he is leaning against her. His head against her breast. She is rocking him like a child. He has no idea how it happened.

"You've never had a real cuddle, have you?" she asks in a tender voice.

"What's a real cuddle?" he asks, from far away.

"Someone holding you in their arms. But not virtual. A cuddle in Real Reality, given by a real person."

Trying to bring himself back into the shooting ground, "Like virtual sex, but in RR?"

She sighs, "No, not sex! Just a cuddle."

Now Bobby can virtually feel his body, but his head is still spiralling like a galaxy. "This blue drug... what is it called?"

Penelope doesn't follow. "What blue drug?"

"Didn't you feel it? Blue, blue, blue... unvirtually blue!"

"No."

The key. At No Limits.

2.11 How VR works

"Let's stop the nonsense! I can't remain the dummy forever." Bobby decides it's time to undertake some serious study. Comfortably nested in his gravito-field, he finds the mindswitch to activate a presenter.

A man walks into his cabin. He's in his early twenties, dressed in the knights' softmetal suit. Thin, sharp, feline, with short black hair. "Good evening, Bobby! Welcome to TS5-on-Titan's VR network. I'm Daniel Lorenz, orientation officer. What can I do for you?" Cool, measured voice, like he's been programmed to be friendly but not to take abuse. Very different from normal presenters.

"I want to get into neurocybernetics large-scale."

The determination in Bobby's voice makes Daniel smile. Easy to guess, he himself likes to study. "Let's not waste one minute. First we must choose a neurocybernetics tutor for you. Which one would you like?"

Five people walk into Bobby's reality, all dressed as knights: two men, two women, and one without a head.

Makes Bobby curious. "Who's the decapitated chunk?"

"A virtual wild card. Meaning you can choose anyone you like."

That could be fun. "Give me Penelope Heinzel!"

"All right. But we need her authorisation first."

"What?"

"The lectures in neurocybernetics are Archive-backed material behind which the brotherhood of the knights engages full responsibility. Involvement of real people requires their consent, as long as they are alive."

"But that's ridiculous!" Bobby is shocked. "Do you mean I can't get Penelope without her consent? But what if I want to fuck her?"

"Then no problem of course – that falls into the category of recreational realities. There are no limitations of any kind on recreational realities." He resumes, "Would you like me to send a message to Penelope Heinzel? She might not have any objection to being your neurocybernetics tutor."

"No thanks. I think I'll choose Colonel Varga instead."

"Smart choice, Bobby," Daniel fully approves. "You won't regret it. Some of his views on neurocybernetics are very personal, but he's a brilliant communicator and teacher."

The cabin door opens. "Hello Bobby! How are you?"

"Colonel Varga!"

The joy of meeting an old friend.

Colonel Varga spends a few minutes inquiring about Bobby's health and his recent experiences at the academy, then he takes him for a virtual walk – VR, not VRR, thank the Almighty Administrator of All Networks!

Bobby's RR carcass is exhausted. Feels virtually nice when you switch it off.

They're walking on a neatly trimmed lawn by the side of a large spherical building. Colonel Varga points to a massive tree, at least seventy metres high. "Do you know what this is called?"

"No."

"It's a chestnut tree. Magnificent, isn't it? The favourite tree of Lady Teyani, who was my prime tutor in neurocybernetics. A remarkable person! You'll meet her one of these days." He puts his hand on Bobby's shoulder, "Now, before we can get you started with neurocybernetics, we need you to have a thorough understanding of how VR functions. But first let me tell you how Teyani began with me. She asked me, 'Phelippe, what do you think an expert is?' I said, 'It's someone who knows everything about one field.' She said, 'No. An expert is someone who has a profound understanding of the fundamental principles of his science. Once you have thoroughly digested the fundamental principles, your knowledge becomes a noetic tree (meaning a tree of understanding) with well-organised branches, on which all bits of information fit nicely like leaves. Without such a tree, information piles up in your mind like chaotic heaps of leaves, and you'll never be able to be creative and grow new branches.' So let's start planting the seeds for your neurocybernetic chestnut tree, Bobby."

They enter the building. A long corridor with lots of doors on each side. "Let's go baba. You know the way primitive computers were operated, don't you?"

"With your fingers!"

"That's right. With keyboards." Colonel Varga opens the first door – an antique door that must be manipulated by a doorknob and that rotates on hinges. He points to a young guy sitting behind a table. He is madly firing small quadrangular keys, his fingers moving remarkably fast.

Bobby has always found the concept of keyboard immensely amusing. Makes him wonder what else, apart from operating computers, these people did with their fingers.

Colonel Varga walks to the next door and opens it. "The problem with keyboards was that they were terribly slow. And they didn't even have a hundred keys. A parallel development was voice recognition, which is quite convenient at times but is even slower. Concomitantly, another technology was appearing: eye-movement activation." Colonel Varga opens the door. This time, no more doorknob, the door slides open to the side. They meet the same guy, it seems, except that now he is an old man. He is sitting behind a flat screen, reading, and he's not doing anything with his fingers. Above the screen, floating in the air, there is a luminous holographic image made of a few hundred squares of all colours lined up in rows and columns.

"The computer sends an invisible beam into the operator's eyes, so as to determine the direction in which he is looking. Each time the operator directs his gaze to one of the keys, that is, one of the little coloured squares,

the computer activates the corresponding function – hence the name 'eyeboard' given to the holographic image. You no longer touch the keys, you look at them. So of course they are called 'eyekeys'. Much faster than using your voice or your fingers. This one is quite a primitive eyeboard. Come and see this one." They walk to the room next door, where a young man is looking at a sleek holographic image made of fluorescent three-dimensional shapes.

"How come this guy looks like the other one?" Bobby notices.

"He's supposed to be his son. It's a part of the program I find rather corny, so I'll spare you the details."

"Thanks, Colonel."

"Now let's examine this eyeboard closely." The general shape is that of a cube, about 20 centimetres long. It is filled with an intricate network made of thousands of luminous lines, squares, circles and varieties of complex geometrical shapes.

"Each of these tiny shapes is an eyekey. This gives you direct access to a wide palette of functions – in the thirty thousands for this eyeboard. All you have to do to activate one of them is look at the corresponding set of eyekeys. The beauty of this eyeboard is that it is retractable, and expandable." Activating an eyekey, Varga changes the holograph. Dramatically simplified, it is now only made of a few dozen rows of cherry-sized spheres strung on straight lines. "This is how you would present the eyeboard to a young child in order to mask the complexity of the machine. You can further simplify it, for animals to use the computer. Conversely, the eyeboard can also be expanded. Look at this!" Varga turns the holograph into a finely woven network of fluorescent geometrical patterns that fills the entire room. "What's fascinating about an expanded eyeboard like this one is that it starts resembling the computer's superastral model."

"The computer's superastral body?"

"Not exactly but kind of. In neurocybernetics, a superastral model is what you use to marude a computer. Now, let me show you the ancestor of the mindboard."

After walking past a few closed doors in the corridor, the colonel takes Bobby to another room, where the same man is sitting on an antique-plastic chair. No more flat screen in front of him, but a wall-sized panel. And his head is wired with hundreds of electrodes.

At that moment Daniel the cool presenter appears in the doorway. "Bobby? Ah, here you are! Sorry to disturb you, Colonel. Bobby, someone is at the door of your cabin, wanting to see you."

"Who is it?"

"Penelope Heinzel. She says she wants to give you a present." Daniel stifles a smile, like he's put the facts together.

"Tell her to come back later! I'm just at a critical point in my program."

"Not to worry," Daniel walks away.

"Please continue, Colonel!"

"One of the first prototypes of mindboard," Varga explains. "All this wiring measures the electrical activity in the man's brain. Here, what activates the computer is no longer eye movement, but brainwaves."

"Power of thought?"

"No, nothing like it. Just simple biofeedback. This man is learning to produce brainwave patterns identifiable by the computer, which activates various commands. It's like pressing a key except that instead of using your finger, you manifest a particular arrangement of brainwaves. The various arrangements of brainwaves are learnt through neurofeedback. Get it? Keyboards had only a hundred keys at the most, whereas a standard mindboard has at least four thousand. (In a mindboard, they're not called keys, they're called mindswitches.) The mindboard has obvious advantages over the eyeboard: it is much faster – you don't have to move your eyes. And of course by combining brainwave patterns you can activate more than one mindswitch at a time, whereas with an eyeboard you can only look at one eyekey at a time."

Colonel Varga walks out of the room, and Bobby follows him. There is only one door left at the end of the corridor. "That's it, we're arriving at the end of this section." Varga opens the door. It leads into Bobby's cabin, where Bobby's RR body is lying in the gravito-field. "It is through a similar mindboard that you send instructions to computers."

"But what's happened to all the wiring?" Bobby asks.

"It has been replaced by sensors in the walls: devices that probe your brainwaves from a distance – distance electrodes."

"But..." Bobby has a flash of understanding, "is there any contraption that is *not* commanded by a mindboard?"

"No. Whether you pilot a spacecraft, activate a phaser rifle, open a door or turn on the water in a sink unit, you do so through a mindboard."

Bobby realises he has been using mindboards since he was a little child without ever asking himself how they worked. He sort of knew about mindswitches but had never questioned any further. That leaves him with a funny feeling. Varga immediately picks it up. "The beauty with the mindboard is that young children learn it effortlessly – so much so that they hardly realise they're using it. It seems perfectly natural to them, like moving their body. This reflects the immense amount of work that was put in the mindboard's design: decades of research by huge teams of cyberneticists, neurophysiologists and engineers from all horizons.

"So is the mindboard part of neurocybernetics?" Bobby asks.

"No, not really. Mindboard designs are part of cybernetics. Neurocybernetics begins where cybernetics and neurophysiology stop. It's a completely different discipline."

Intriguing.

"Shall we break so you can say hello to Penelope?" the colonel suggests.

"Wait! I still don't get how the mindboard transmits VR signals to me."

"It doesn't. In VR, you use the mindboard to send out instructions such as 'move my arm to the left' or 'discontinue this program'. But the input, meaning the VR sensations, come to your brain through a different set of devices." Colonel Varga takes Bobby back into the corridor, to one of the doors they haven't opened. In that room, they find a bearded version of yet again the same guy. Bobby is thankful to Varga for sparing him the details. But the guy is also wearing funny goggles with a leather edge. The goggles are wired, and linked to a machine. Looks rather creepy. "The most primitive of all VR devices," Varga comments.

"Would you like to try, Bobby?" the guy offers.

"Thanks, man," Bobby takes the goggles and puts them on. He finds himself in a gorilla's body, frolicking in the jungle. A gross image with thick grain.

"The sound comes separately, through headphones," Varga explains.

"And how do I move?" Bobby asks, disconcerted by the fact that when he lifts up his hand, the gorilla's arm doesn't follow.

"Put this on!" the bearded guy hands Bobby a pair of thick gloves.

"Wired!" the guy says when Bobby has put the gloves on. Now when Bobby moves his arms, the gorilla's arms move too. Sort of. It's not quite accurate.

"As long as the mindboard wasn't invented, VR locomotion remained rather approximate," Varga comments.

"And what about smells, and bodily sensations?" Bobby asks.

"There are none at this stage. Come and see what they did next."

Bobby takes off the goggles and the wired gloves, thanks the guy and follows Colonel Varga into the next room. It's some kind of lab with pieces of equipment everywhere. In the middle, on a large flat table, there is a black cat whose head is wired with dozens of electrodes.

"A mindboard for cats?"

"Yes, but there is more. A team of neurosurgeons has implanted permanent electrodes into the cat's cranial nerves and various brain zones. It's through these electrodes that the cat receives the VR signals. The imitation is perfect, the cat has no way of differentiating between VR and real perceptions. Get it?"

"Not quite." It's when it comes to RR that Bobby gets muddled.

"All right!" When in his teacher character, Varga can display infinite patience. "What happens when a real cat sees a mouse?"

"You mean a RR cat and a RR mouse?"

"Yes, an unplugged cat. Nothing virtual, just plain real reality."

Fascinating concept, when you think about it.

Varga smiles and tries again, "A RR cat sees a RR mouse, what happens? Sensory impressions are captured through the cat's eyes, ears, nostrils. These turn into electric currents which travel to the brain through sensory nerves. The impulses reach the brain, and it's in the brain that the mouse's image is formed. All right?"

"Right."

"Suppose an electrode can mimic exactly the current that travels along the optic nerve. When this current reaches the brain the cat sees a mouse, exactly as if a RR mouse was running in front of it. Same with the other senses. The brain is tricked into believing that the mouse is real. It has no way of telling the difference. So, the cat cannot differentiate between VR and RR."

"So it must also work the other way round," Bobby construes. "Can the cat be tricked into believing that RR things are virtual?"

"Hey?" Varga frowns. "But real cats don't know about virtual reality!"

"Mm..." Bobby nods, pondering deeply.

2.12 RR cuddle

Disconnecting all VR (even AR), Bobby lies in his gravito-field and looks at his RR body. Not a pretty sight. Offensively skinny. Not as skinny as when he first arrived on Titan, though. The muscle stimulators have made his limbs double in width. And perhaps all this exhausting VRR biz has helped too. He still looks pathologically thin, a pitiful shrimp with a radish in lieu of a prick. In HEL his penis was strong, his balls splendid. Falling into Real Reality is like having been castrated.

"I hate all this RR stuff!"

Wave of sadness, at least minus 3 or minus 4 on the depression scale. Old reflexes taking over, he blocks off the sadness as if the damn ON inspectors were about to erupt into his reality.

And what about his RR face? Activating a mirror, he contemplates his sullen cheeks, his thin lips, his short 20% curly 80% scruffy black hair. The general picture is not as ghastly as when Amy first forced him to look at himself. Almost, though. For sure, the complexion isn't as green. Now it's more like grey. "Could I like my eyes?" he wonders. They're a bit too small, and not completely in the right place. If they were on another face, perhaps. Then it comes to his mind that what he is looking at is an AR mirror, of course. Makes him wonder what a RR mirror looks like, if there is any such thing.

The door of the cabin opens. Penelope enters. "Hi! How are you? I brought you a present, it's a... Oh my God what do I see?" she laughs, covering her eyes with her left hand. "A naked man! Sorry, the green light was on over your door, so I just walked in." She is not wearing the knights' suit but a long dress with green fractal patterns that change as she moves, reflecting a dim glow on the cabin's walls. "Take my present, it's just what you need!" Keeping her eyes covered, she throws him the long white T-shirt she brought with her. "Put it on! It's a nightshirt made in S24-silk, the latest fad produced by genetically engineered silkworms. *Amazingly* soft on your skin, like a caress. And it's been invented by one of our brother knights! TS5 is making piles of money by selling it throughout the Outer Planets. Have you heard of Paris-upon-Uranus? It's a small space station with creme-de-la-creme fashion designers. They've just adopted S24-silk

for their entire range. Can you believe it? We're going to make a fucking fortune! The engineering of S24 silkworms requires so much hyperlogic that no one has been able to reproduce them apart from us." She uncovers her eyes. "Now you're presentable. Doesn't it look gorgeous on you! (It's fine for a nightshirt to be loose.)"

Silence.

"Are you all right?" she kneels down on the floor on the edge of the gravito-field's translucent oval shape, thrusting her hand into it to reach him. "What's happening to you?"

It takes him a moment. "I feel like a RR heap of rubbish."

"But why? It's all going rather well at the moment. Okay, you're not scoring past the Milky Way, but it's just the beginning."

She doesn't understand.

Her hand runs up and down his arm. That feels nice.

"Come on, let's get you out of this gravito-field!" she says.

"Why?"

"Because if you stay there too long you're going to turn into a VR potato," she says, as if it was funny.

He doesn't budge.

"Please!" A completely different voice. And that depth which sometimes comes through her eyes when she shuts up.

She pulls him by the hand. Gently. And looking straight into his eyes. He sits up and sets foot on the floor. She holds his arm and walks him to his bed, a simple mattress on the cabin's uncarpeted floor. "We're going to have to do something about this room," she says, switching off the gravito-field.

The translucent cocoon fades away gradually.

"In RR, I like horizontality the best!" he says, collapsing onto the mattress.

It makes her chuckle. "How about something you've never done before?"

"Recreational?"

"Quite recreational, yep."

"I'd like to see that!" he mumbles, and with his cynical expression of blasé virtual bastard he's not showing off. In HEL he tried everything recreational one could possibly experiment with – the entire database from Abominable Orgies of the Borgias to Zoo-Keeping on Altair, via pastimes such as Bingo, Polo, Cannibalism and Trans-Sexual Pregnancy. Until he finally chose fishing as the least boring of the lot. That's the truth. "What ya got in mind?"

"A RR cuddle. Exactly what you need," she announces in her soft voice, kneeling on the bed.

He doesn't want to tell her that he doesn't feel like having sex because when RR people take on a sweet voice like this, if you tell them to piss off it upsets their neurohormonal balance, and because anyway she's going to

tell him again that a cuddle isn't the same as sex, regardless of what HEL's recreational databases may say. And also because he finds her kind of interesting, even though she speaks too much and way too fast.

But why would anyone want to have sex with a RR body like his?

As usual, she takes his silence for tacit agreement. "Let me tell you all about it. First you need a duvet. I won't be a minute," she says. She walks out of the room and thirty seconds later she's back with a huge duvet, "This one is made with GG337 feathers *and* S24 silk. GG stands for Green Goose, it's a particular genetic strand engineered on TS5," she elucidates, throwing the duvet onto the bed. "I got it on special, two for the price of one. So you can keep it."

Under the duvet, Bobby finds himself in semi-darkness. Particularly soft, he has to admit. And already warm.

"Then you need someone to slip in and take you in her arms," she says, doing just that.

Shame. The shame of being small and ugly, of having nothing to give.

"How about we go virtual?" he tells her.

"No! No!" she whispers. "There's something special about holding a real person in your arms."

These RR freaks are impossible. It's like they live on a different planet.

Hopefully, this is going to be a short sexual intercourse.

"Think of something, Bobby: here, there's no Omnipresent Network. What happens under this duvet is a secret sealed between you and me. No one will ever know."

"What? Do you mean there is not even a basic security system tapping us?"

"Of course not. Everything we say is recorded in your own computer logbook. But as long as you don't break the law, no one is allowed to access it. It would be completely against the knights' ethics. And I have switched on the red light over your door. Privacy secured."

"But privacy is dangerous!" Everyone knows that in HEL. "And what if... what if we had a heart attack?"

"You mean both of us at the same time? Now *that* would have to be really full on sex. Anyhow, don't worry. If you had a heart attack the computer would pick it up."

"But how can this be really safe if no one outside is monitoring our emotions?"

"Bobby..." she lets go of him and thrusts her head out of the duvet-secured atmosphere, taking in a deep breath and wondering how much more of this she can take.

Now that she is miles away, he realises how warm her body was. "All right! All right! Could I have a lesson in RR cuddles, please?"

Another deep breath, and she dives back into the under-duvet. "This one is a cuddle with strictly defined roles: I give, you receive."

And she takes him in her arms again. "Close your eyes."

This time Bobby shuts up and plays dead, enjoying her warmth.

Something passes between them.

He's not virtually sure if he can feel the difference from ordinary sex, except that ordinary sex is usually more eventful.

Something passes. It's soothing.

"Do you like RR cuddles?" she asks him.

"I don't know."

2.13 The deliberate choice

The day begins at the shooting ground and Bobby scores like a dog. Actually, the damn Saint-Bernard would probably score better. Then it's transpersonal motivation class. Ugly. When it comes to his turn he hasn't got anything to say. Not the faintest idea what his life purpose could be. Nope. In addition they all say they want to help him but they feel he doesn't let them, he has a problem with receiving. Long silences stretching into even longer ones. Rather oppressive. Don't they find it boring? Never, they say. They say it's part of the process. Then a clock beeps and they rush back to the shooting ground, let's not wait one minute. He tells them, "Thanks a lot but I gotta go back to my cabin to watch a program on the discipline biz, to make myself presentable so I can meet Lieutenant Semper." From the classroom's VRR, he switches himself back into his cabin, lying in his gravito-field.

In the cabin, Szar is waiting for him.

"Szar, I haven't seen you for ages!"

"You have to start learning to live without me." Szar comes and sits by Bobby's side.

"Life without you? Not even an option!" Bobby jokes. Taking a closer look at Szar's huge shoulders and his magnificent long curly hair, he asks, "Listen, this wasn't your RR body, was it?"

"Yes it was! Except of course this clone image has been adjusted to match the general increase in size of the Earth's population. In Atlantis, people were much smaller."

"How small?"

Szar takes on his exact Atlantean appearance. Half a head smaller than Bobby.

Bobby grins.

"When I first became Master Gervin's apprentice, I was much skinnier," Szar adds, changing himself into a bony kid with a rather imbecilic look plastered on his face, and clad in a ridiculously pink costume.

"Far out, man! How did you get from A to B?"

"The power of the Dragon!" Szar restores himself to his full-size self with that inimitable 'dont-fuck-with-me' tranquil smile on his face.

"That's exactly what I need! Where can I find that Dragon?"

"Not an option for the moment," Szar is categorical. "The paths of ancient times can't be repeated. The Underworlds are sealed. Now is the age of the Point wizards."

"Maybe I've come in the wrong age..." Bobby starts wondering. "What the hell am I going to do? My Point is about as good as my RR carcass."

"That's nonsense. Your Point is exceptionally strong. Why do you think you're here?"

Hard to believe, but said with so much conviction that Bobby has to stop and think.

"If my Point is strong, then why do I perform like a spastic kitten?" he asks. "There's something deeply wrong with me, isn't there?"

"Yes there is. Your astral body is damaged. Full of filth – the filth which the Rex's Hyper Reality has accumulated inside you."

"I'm a filthy VR potato," Bobby summarises with realism. "But how can a filthy VR potato have an extremely strong Point?"

"Do you really want to know that?"

Bobby's natural inclination would be to drop a casual "Of course, man!" but there's a shining Dragon intensity in Szar's eyes that tells him to think carefully like, if you open that box be ready for the fireworks.

Perhaps, caution would be to say no.

But who wants to remain a spastic kitten forever? "Yes, I really want to know." Spoken with the certainty of someone who has nothing to lose. Everything is already lost.

Flash in Szar's eyes, like a virtual drug. "Bobby, your Point was already built diamond-sharp *before* you incarnated in Hyper-Earth Link."

"Before..." The word acts as a trigger. Chain-reaction in Bobby's brain chemistry. "Are you talking about a past life?"

"Several past lives."

Endorphin flutter and weird feelings, his right brain taken by the drug, his left brain remembering the Archive prog on reincarnation he watched three days ago. "A Point wizard is someone who's mastered his destiny and can influence the course of his reincarnations. Why would a bloke like that want to reincarnate in HEL?"

Silence.

The chain reaction goes on, his left brain remembering the tree Varga pointed out. A chestnut tree. Teyani's chestnut tree. And the log cabin at the lake. Penelope's hand caressing his chest. Sweet. The log cabin at the lake. He never walked in, he always slept on the veranda. His left brain questioning, "I have made a huge mistake, is that it? Reincarnating in Hyper-Earth Link was the blunder of a lifetime?"

"No, not a mistake. A deliberate choice, Bobby."

"But why?"

Up and down in spaces, images flowing fast in his head, like a VR prog in fast-forward mode. There was a chestnut tree close to the lake. But that was not in HEL. Yet it was the same lake, and the same log cabin. And there is a woman walking his time track, laughing, shining. Her name... Why can't he remember her name? She holds the key. His life trajectory is set around her.

Is she the Panther?

Teyani knows the answer.

Screaming louder than the forgetfulness of the world, "I love you!"

But why can't I remember your name?

Drifting along the currents of time.

"Can you see the black muck?" Szar points out.

Black clouds in Bobby's head. The filth of the Rex is thick. Suffocating. "Is this what I collected in Hyper-Earth Link? It's abysmal!"

"It's what you have to overcome in order to become a knight."

Then forget it! It's impossible, there is too much of it. It's too thick. Bobby is convulsing in his gravito-field. "But why did I go there? Why did I do that to myself?"

Silence.

"You know the answer!" Bobby shouts, "Tell me! I didn't *have* to reincarnate in HEL! Why did I do that to myself?"

"Not to yourself, to the Rex."

Bobby shouts, "It was madness! Why did I fucking do it?"

"Enlightened madness."

Shaking with pain and terror, screaming, "Madness! Madness! But why?" He bursts into tears.

Szar's hand is on his chest. "You have challenged the power of the Rex. This is the first round, when you had to lie powerless in his clutches."

How can Szar say enormities like this in such a peaceful, self-assured voice? "Me, challenging the Rex? What's this bullshit? I'm a nothing, a fuckwit, a zero! This is complete nonsense!"

"No. If you are here, it means you have already won half of the first round."

"What?"

"You have demonstrated that a member of the Archive brotherhood can incarnate in the infamous womb of the beast, be chained in a VR jail, degraded by the HR of the Rex, and yet find his way back to the light."

The light.

Silence. Profound silence.

There is a smile in the light.

Teyani.

Light without end.

The most beautiful virtual drug Bobby has ever tasted.

Instantly sedated and endorphined out, he swims in this ocean of light.

Magnificent. Virtually unreal.

Hiram left his keys at No Limits.

2.14 Piloting premiere

When Szar takes his leave, Bobby is completely gone, spread through infinity. He hardly hears what Szar says as he is walking out. Except for the last sentence: "The Panther will come to give you your first flying lesson tomorrow morning 05:05, TS5-on-Titan time."

The Panther!

Back to virtuality! The first thing that comes to Bobby's mind is that he can't possibly receive the Panther in such a boring reality. He remembers Penny mentioning something about his cabin not being up to it, so he decides to go and inspect hers, for inspiration. Courageously, he RR-walks into the RR corridor and rings at his neighbour's door. She is away. An unknown female clone appears in AR and offers, "Would you like me to call Penelope?"

"No thanks." Bobby RR-walks back home and calls Daniel the cool presenter, asking for the best interior designer of the VR library.

"His name is Mario, he's a pain in the ass! How about I send you the second best instead: Jacks and Lou. They're great."

"Sure."

Two gay guys wearing tiny virtual earrings turn up. Clones with great taste and sensitivity – you can tell by the subtlety of their looks during the short counselling session that precedes the transformation. Soon Bobby no longer lives within four blank walls but in a magnificent park facing the sea, with a forest of chestnut trees on the right and, in the distance. a lofty mountain range on the left.

"It's called Trompe l'Oeil Reality," Lou explains. "Be careful not to walk into the fucking walls."

"Trust us, the Black Panther will appreciate the details," Jacks pointed to two white eagles flying high in the sky. "We'll leave it here for now 'cause you're in a hurry, but we'll come back next week to make it more exciting."

Not wasting a minute, Bobby liaises with Colonel Varga. "What do people learn in their first flying lesson?" he asks. The last thing he wants is to look like an idiot during the lesson.

A lesson with the Black Panther!

"The anatomy of the command system in the Scalene fighters' family, objectified in the form of an eyeboard," Varga tells him. So Bobby switches on the red light over his cabin door and, led by Daniel, goes to find Shankar Rashi, the man who designed the first Scalenes, more than a hundred years ago. Together, they spend the day inspecting the flight decks of Scalene fighters, eyeboarding their command system, discussing the fine details with pilots and engineers. In the evening, Shankar takes him on a Scalene 213 for a quick flight around Titan. Quite an uncomplicated expedition, except on landing when Bobby inadvertently disconnects the automatic piloting and crashes the craft, not only killing himself and Shankar but also destroying the spaceport's main control tower. "That's okay," Shankar reassures him, "that's the way you learn!" After this, they spend the rest of the evening practising manual taking off and landing, first with a 213, then with the more modern 276, and then for fun with the antique Scalene 001.

Now it's 04:37, TS5-on-Titan time. Bobby is nervously VR-pacing in his park. He hasn't had much sleep. As soon as he went to bed, images and impressions of his session with Szar rushed back into his mind – some ghastly, some tantalising, none of them completely clear. But he wants to be presentable for the Panther, so he pushes the nightmare out of his reality and pulls himself together. And he starts reviewing mentally the 27 primary system areas of the Scalene fighter's command system.

She arrives early. He sees her walking in the park. Towards him.

Oh...

She is *so* beautiful. So elegant. The knights' costume seems to have been designed specially for her. And such presence! Such a simple, perfect way of walking by putting one foot in front of the other.

"Hello, Bobby!"

Such a beautiful voice. Mellifluous (a word Bobby heard in Amy's encyclopedia, it has to do with honey).

"Hello."

"How are you today?" Now she is *just* in front of him.

"Oh, quite good."

There is not even one second of time lag. Meaning, her RR body is less that 300,000 km away.

"Szar told me you were going through an eventful period," she says, and she asks him to tell her what happened during the past life session. While Bobby speaks, she listens silently. Flashes of lightning in her eyes.

Just telling the story to her seems to give it meaning. Bobby isn't sure which meaning yet, but he can definitely feel meaning. A great relief.

The Panther makes no comments, she gets straight down to business. In the middle of Bobby's park – it's called the Gardens of Babylon, Lou told him before leaving – she VR-manifests a Scalene 213 resting in the air one metre above ground level. "Do you know what this is, Bobby?" she asks.

"Hum... Scalene?"

"That's right. Scalene 213. The standard training machine for our pilots. Baba first: do you know why the fighter is called a Scalene?"

"Er... by analogy with a scalene triangle, perhaps?"

"Exactly. This is the common thread between all the fighters of the Scalene family: a flat triangular shape. Nearly an isosceles triangle – the right side is only a few centimetres shorter than the left. This one is 31.36 metres long and 4.76 metres high," she says as they are walking past the fighter's pointy nose. "No windows. Always painted black."

Bobby admires the way she remains personal when exposing bare technical facts. And her lips are even more finely chiselled than he remembered.

On the side of the craft there is a sign made of a black panther jumping out of a large golden sun. "My symbol. You'll have to find your own symbol when you graduate as a knight." Activating a switch, she unmasks the door. A five-step staircase silently appears under it.

"Get in, Sir Bobby!" she says, and she follows him into the fighter's flight deck. A large circular vault, 7 metres in diameter, 3.4 metres high. It's empty, apart from 7 chairs – gravito-armchairs with lavish black gravito-cushions. She invites Bobby to take the central chair, and sits on his right.

"The first thing a pilot must assimilate is the command system," she pursues. "In real-life piloting, the command system is activated through a mindboard. But for the purpose of learning, you unfold it as an eyeboard." She conjures up a fluorescent holograph, 3 by 2 by 2 metres, made of thousands of shining geometrical shapes with a dominant bright yellow hue. And she starts enumerating the 27 primary systems.

Bobby doesn't have to worry about following because he already knows the 27 areas by heart, so he can concentrate on the Panther. The more he looks at her, the more stunning he finds her. Everything about her shines: her Point, her skin, her heart. Her intelligence. He carefully studies the two little vertical lines on top and on the sides of her nose, and how they slightly contract when she wants to emphasize a point. There is a tiny beauty spot close to her left nostril. He hadn't noticed it before. And when she smiles, you can always see a little more of her upper teeth than the lower ones. It really does something to his Point (the smile, not the teeth).

"Now let's recap the main functions," she says. "What's this one?" She points to area 3 of the central command eyeboard by making it shine a little brighter.

"Left propulsion nacelles."

"And this one?"

"Aft facing phasers 1 to 57."

"This one?"

"Left phasers 1 to 101."

"And what's primary system area 27?"

"Peripheral maruding units."

"Excellent!" she seems delighted. "Excellent! Now why don't you show us how to take off?"

"Er... I don't think you told me how to take off."

"True. But as I hadn't told you about central command area 27 either, I thought that perhaps..." Amused smile, same fathomless irony as in Szar's smiles.

Caught! Bobby freezes.

"You react, you die!" she points an accusing finger at him. "Take off!"

As soon as the 213 has taken off, the walls of the flight deck disappear, replaced by a VR 360° spherical vision of the space around the craft. Below, the Gardens of Babylon quickly fade. They find themselves surrounded by Titan's fiery-orange mists.

"Not too bad," she tells him in a comforting voice. "Bobby. I do appreciate your effort. I like it when things move fast."

They emerge out of Titan's thick atmosphere. In orbit. The magic of space. Titan below, and a spectacular view of Saturn in the distance.

"Automatic pilot engaged. Waiting for instructions," Bobby says.

"We have a little bit of time." She closes her eyes and takes her head in her hands. "Tell me, how do you feel about what you saw during your session with Szar?"

Completely overwhelmed. But if he whimpers she's going to yell at him – she's a real panther. So he takes it tangentially. "I don't understand how I can have a strong Point if all this black filth has accumulated in my astral body."

"Your Point is beyond the realm of the Rex. The Rex's Hyper Reality couldn't touch it. All that is below your Point has been soiled and trampled. But above it, you are free."

A depressing perspective: knowing that Bobby feels his Point a few inches above his head, that doesn't leave much of him unsoiled.

"So what am I supposed to do now? Get rid of the black smoke, is that it?" he asks.

"Correct." She opens her eyes and plunges her gaze into him.

Transfixed, he is. Feeling her presence in his bone marrow.

"I'm going to help you, Bobby. And so are Szar, Barkhan Seer and the entire Archive brotherhood. But it's not going to feel nice."

They're flying, so it's you-react-you-die. Bobby remains cool. "What does this mean?"

"When all the black muck comes out of your system, you're not going to like it. That filth stinks," she says.

That, he had already guessed. "Is there really a chance it could be removed?"

"There is," she says in an 'I'm-not-promising-anything' kind of tone.

"How?"

"The evil done through Hyper Reality will have to be undone through Hyper Reality. There could be other possibilities, but we won't even attempt them," she says in a definitive tone.

"Why not try all possible treatments?"

"Because this is what you and Master Barkhan Seer decided before you descended to incarnate in Hyper-Earth Link."

Bobby gulps. Stuff the principles! This part of the story *does* make him react. "But why would I have chosen to do something so fucking stupid? Arrogance, is that it? *I* can beat the Rex, no worries – that kind of abysmal nonsense?"

"No, not that. You knew perfectly well there would be no guarantee of success. But if you *do* succeed, then it will prepare the way for the rehabilitation of a lot of people."

"Oh, I see! I was the kind of fuckwit who never has virtual sex, is that it? A saint who wants to save humanity?"

She laughs. "Bobby, you're sweet!" she takes his hand.

His anger instantly melts. Captured by her eyes, he can no longer speak. Nor breathe.

"Bobby, this is the Apocalypse!" Boundless gentleness in her voice. "Unless everyone wants to save everyone else and takes action accordingly, the Rex wins and the whole of humanity goes down the drain."

Hiram's keys? He left them at No Limits.

She keeps holding his hand. Bobby doesn't care, he'll breathe later. It's so wonderful to be held by her.

Suddenly, life has meaning.

Infinity above his head.

In the Point he and she are one. Kinship beyond words.

With all my mind, with all my heart.

Dancing in the stars. There's a missing bit in the puzzle.

That which is, has always been.

Insidious edge of the abyss.

Finally, it had to happen, she lets go of his hand. "Now, get us back onto Titan. To the spaceport, not to your cabin."

Daring, "Will you come back to visit me?"

Biting her lip, "I wish I could. The blockade doesn't make it easy. Tomorrow, I'm flying back to the Philadelphias. Have you heard of the White Eagles, Bobby?"

"Szar told me a few legends."

She nods. "The White Eagles have a saying: 'I am with you, even when I am far away.' Tune into Szar's presence and you will find me. Always."

In her eyes, the liquid magic of ancient mysteries.

Forever love, White Eagle.

2.15 Life purpose, next episode

Bobby spends the first hours of the morning holding the Points of his choir members in the shooting ground. In the last three days, Anna has beaten John's record, scoring 331 on three consecutive White Line trips. Penny has pulverised her own record, scoring 320, the choir's third best. Don and Molly have reached a PPMS of 202. They all agree it's because of Bobby. And they don't know how to thank him. If they can hold on to these scores for six weeks, their choir will be raised to beta-pi – meaning they can no longer get the sack from the academy. Conversely, any slip from beta-omega takes you into the fatal gamma zone.

It's transpersonal motivation time. First they listen to guest speakers who have come to talk about their life achievements and the motivational forces that drove them. Today: Alexander the Great, Raphael, Rasputin and Mary Magdalena. Molly clicks with Mary Magdalena, submitting her to a barrage of questions. After the guest speakers they move to sharing time. Molly feels deeply inspired, certain that her Central Motivational Thread is giving – large scale giving. Anna is more and more of a mystic, with a CMT in the line of White Eagle ecstasy. She's convinced that Raphael was inspired by the White Eagle. Enthused by Alexander the Great and Rasputin, Paul still

wants to screw all the girls of the academy, even though it *can't* be his CMT, so they all tell him. Don is anxious to plunge his neurones into hyperlogic, it fascinates him. The choir members all seem to agree that hyperlogic is the spunkiest branch of neurocybernetics, they can't wait till their scores qualify them to begin.

Bobby listens to them as if from a distance, trying not to slouch excessively. No matter what happens, the knights are supposed to keep their back straight. Under the table he keeps pushing back the dog who's sniffing his private parts. When his turn arrives, he drones, "Today I have something to tell you. I have found my life purpose. My life purpose..." he speaks in a slow, monotonous, resigned voice, his extinguished eyes looking down to the table's shining flat surface, his hands underneath it, making a last attempt to push the dog away.

"Sam! Come here!" Penny yells at the monster. "Sit! *Sit! Sit*, I said!"

"My life purpose," Bobby resumes, "is to show that it is possible for a VR potato to become a knight of the Apocalypse."

"It's limpid!" Paul couldn't agree more. "Anyone taking a look at Bobby's life circumstances would immediately tell him, 'Bobby, your life purpose is to show that a VR potato can become a knight.'"

The others keep silent, like there is more to be said.

Bobby pursues, "As to my Central Motivational Thread, I still haven't had any decisive flash. Driving forces... not sure either." Vagueness in his eyes, he looks through John rather that at John, and he goes into pause mode.

Loooong silence, the Saint-Bernard's turbine breathing in the background.

"Don't you think it's a good life purpose for him?" Paul asks.

John is the MC, it's his duty to express the feelings of the community. "Bobby," patient, kind-hearted voice, "finding your life purpose is a realisation that brings profound serenity – a sense of inner depth, clarity, and joy. Joy!"

"Don't some people have a life purpose that's less joyful than others'?" Bobby questions.

A minute of deep reflection, interrupted when the dog jumps up, resting his forelegs on the table, gratifying Molly and Don with his heavy breathing, streams of saliva dribbling on each side of his mouth. Saint-Bernards dribble a lot, it's one of the problems with them.

Don is only mildly amused, "But what's wrong with him today?"

"Nothing! He's just being a puppy!" Using both hands, Penny and Molly pull Sam by the collar and force him to sort of sit. Clear he could jump any time, anywhere, but Bobby no longer worries about him. He's programmed his gravito-field to go on maximum security each time an animal enters his reality. RR bodies are ridiculously fragile, it's one of the problems with them.

"Bobby, why not simply look at driving forces and forget about all the rest?" Molly suggests.

Driving forces? He hasn't got any. Apart from seeing the Panther, of course, but that's none of their biz.

Don reflects, "Often when people can't find any driving force or motivational thread, their mistake is that they're looking for things they *should* do, instead of things they'd *like* to do. Keep it light, man!"

"Yeah, Bobby," Molly seconds, "is there anything you like here?"

Bobby has to think. They wait, patiently. Finally he lets out in a small voice, "I like it when you and Don practise at the shooting ground. There's something beautiful about your Point-pairing." He pauses. "I like when Penny laughs. And I like what's in her eyes when she becomes silent." Longer pause. "And I really like Szar and Colonel Varga. Difficult to imagine life without them."

Waves of enthusiasm sweeping through the room. "That's plenty!" John expresses. "Each of these is a driving force, Bobby!"

"What else do you like? Tell us!" Molly insists.

"I think..." Bobby's voice chokes. "I like when I help you to improve your scores with my Point. It's painful, 'cause in the meantime my own scores are getting worse and worse. Still, I think I like it. It's the only thing I can give. To anyone."

Another silence, but this time a magic one. Flaring of heartness. Endorphin-stimulant drug cocktail wafting through their reality. Or perhaps different from virtual drugs, after all.

"That's the thing about you, Bobby," Anna raises her voice, "in this life you have the Point, and *nothing* else."

Spoken with devastating simplicity. A naked truth that zeroes into Bobby's innermost core. Meaning his Point.

2.16 Formidable weapon

"The evil done through HR must be undone through HR." Bobby mumbles to himself, walking to his appointment with Colonel Varga.

He stops to ask directions from a woman sitting behind a desk. Dressed like the knights. Not pretty. She must be real. "Excuse me, I'm looking for room 111."

"At the end of the corridor, on your left," the woman answers.

"Thanks." Bobby takes the corridor. It's empty. No windows, no carpet, pure metal, like the bowel network of TS5. Without thinking about it, he finds himself whistling *Blue Moon*.

The evil done through HR must be undone through HR. Neurocybernetics will save him. Perhaps. That's if the mountain of offensive toxic material stored in his astral body is wanting to let go. Otherwise... from what he has understood from the VR programs on reincarnation, it doesn't look good for him. If he were to die with such a grotty, revolting, foul-smelling, evil-looking astral body, where the hell would he end up?

"What's the worst that could happen?" He runs the scenario in his mind. If he died right now... expectably, he would reincarnate in Hyper-Earth Link. Like attracts like: his astral body would be magnetically attracted to the black filth of HEL. And then what? No more radish in lieu of prick. No more RR carcass to tamper with. Of course, he himself could never wish that. He's a knight. He couldn't possibly let the Panther down. Yet it's easy to see how others could feel the temptation.

He mindswitches door 111 open and walks into the semi-darkness of a hall. But instead of Colonel Varga, he meets another friend.

"Master Barkhan Seer!"

"*Master* Barkhan Seer? Oho! I got a promotion."

Liquid gold of the Brown Robes. It warms your Point, it warms your heart.

"Let's walk," his arm around Bobby's shoulder, he starts pacing slowly in the hall. It's much larger than Bobby had thought at first. You can't see the walls or the ceiling, just darkness. Yet Bobby and Barkhan Seer see each other as if it were day.

"So I heard you knew me in my past life," Bobby engages the conversation.

"Your past lives," Barkhan Seer corrects.

Bobby is consumed with curiosity. "What kind of asshole was I?"

"Stubborn. Excessively stubborn."

A stubborn asshole. That rings true, somehow. "What else?"

"Better if you find out these things by yourself, son. When it is told to you by other people, it always creates false ideas."

"Let's not wait a minute. How do I find out?"

A grave nod. Barkhan Seer Point-heartedly approves of the urge to know. "Neurocybernetics is the path."

"Aren't I already neurocyberneticised to the eyeballs? From what I'm being told, it's not only in the shooting ground that I receive HR signals. There's HR everywhere, from my Trompe l'Oeil Reality walls to my virtual underwear. Even the damn brown puree the medicomputer pumps into my stomach four times a day is neurocyberneticised, through some mysterious process."

"True. By the way, don't you feel like giving up proto-puree?"

"You mean eating RR food?" Disgusted face. The very idea of stuffing chunks of RR substance into his mouth and swallowing them makes Bobby feel sick.

"Start with juices, perhaps."

"I'll consider it. Anyhow, what more of this neurocybernetic stuff can I swallow, tell me?" Bobby asks.

"It's not quantity that matters, it's quality. And the quality of the HR signals is not under your control, it is adjusted by the computers according to the response of your nervous system – high mathematics, well polished technics."

"So I just sit back and wait for neurocybernetics to save me, is that it?"

"On the contrary. Neurocybernetics is a path of will. Designed to expand consciousness beyond all limitations, and give you the means to achieve the impossible. You won't achieve the impossible by sitting back and waiting! What HR accomplishes is subtle bodybuilding – developing vehicles of consciousness. Then it's up to you to use these vehicles and make them work."

"So what do I do, exactly?"

Blazing eyes, momentous presence, he stops and penetrates Bobby with his gaze. "First, understand. Then conquer!" The power behind the words makes Bobby shiver.

Now that Bobby's eyes have adjusted to the liquid darkness, he can see more of the hall. Dome-shaped. At least 80 metres wide. Perhaps even larger. It's hard to say. There are no walls in sight, only the transparent domed ceiling through which a night sky is shining.

A breath-taking expanse! Stars with colours like Bobby has never seen in any virtuality. Stars with life, and even more presence than Barkhan Seer himself.

"Where are we, exactly?"

"In a virtual emanation of Archive Hall 5," the big boss announces.

Mesmerised, Bobby can't look anywhere but up. "These stars are out of the world! So we're in WTC network?"

"Not exactly the World to Come. Just a virtual emanation of it."

"What's the difference?"

"This is a VR representation of my Archive Hall – a reflection of the World to Come into Virtual Reality."

"Doesn't feel like normal VR, though," Bobby comments. A reality flooded with presence. Absolutely magnificent, like all the crap of the world has been left way behind.

Barkhan Seer's laser-beam gaze stays locked on Bobby, "Virtual emanations are no ordinary VR. They convey spiritual vibrations – atmospheres of consciousness."

"So is this what neurocybernetics is about: Virtual Reality *plus*? A VR that conveys Spirit?"

"It's certainly part of it, yes. But neurocybernetics is a vast body of knowledge, it has many facets. Behind it is a science of consciousness which the Archive people have been developing for more than ten thousand years. In reality, it began much earlier. On the old continent, Atlantis, the Masters of Thunder had already gathered a phenomenal amount of spiritual knowledge. It was transferred into the Archive not long before the flood that ended the Atlantean civilisation."

So many pieces to fit into this puzzle. "In Atlantis, did you live at the same time as Szar?"

"No, much earlier. Szar was one of the masters of the last hour. I came thousands of years before him. I wasn't the first, though. There were gen-

erations of Brown Robes before me. Fascinating times, when titanic forces were clashing on the surface of the Earth. Fights there were, like you would find difficult to imagine. My mission accomplished, I departed from the kingdom and went to live in the spheres of Highness, where all things are One.

Many centuries later, not long before the end of Atlantis, my brothers in the Brown Robe called me back. They knew Master Barkhan Seer doesn't mind a good fight, and fighting they could foresee in plenty. So I returned – not to the kingdom, but to the World to Come, where I had the privilege of taking part in the building of the Archive Halls and the ritual of the Archive transfer. Ever since then, I have stayed here, playing chess against the Rex."

"You have been playing chess against the Rex for ten thousand years?"

"Thirteen thousand years. Not just me – the entire Archive brotherhood."

The Archive people. Another bit in the puzzle. "Are they the Masters of Thunder?"

"The Masters of Thunder originated it, but right from the start it included initiates of other orders such as the White Eagles and the Field Wizards. After Atlantis, many newcomers joined and gradually became Archive initiates. The Archive people are now a considerable force, supported by mighty allies in the worlds of the gods and other levels of reality."

The time scale of the enterprise fills Bobby with wonder. "So how long since it all began?"

"More than fifty thousand years."

"Fifty thousand years..." Bobby glances at Barkhan Seer, then contemplates the stars again, "out of which the last thirteen thousand have been spent playing chess against the Rex."

"Thirteen thousand years of meticulous planning, precisely calculated strategic moves, planting seeds and training our people. Thirteen thousand years of preparation, concentrating our forces, waiting for the final confrontation. And now the time has come, the battle is raging. Like never before, and never again. It is the Apocalypse."

"Who wins what, in this game?"

"We're not the only players, Bobby. The whole of humanity is at war. If human beings lose, they end up enslaved in the Rex's VR machines. If they win, they inherit the World to Come."

WTC is still a vague concept in Bobby's mind. But just by taking a look at the sky, it's easy to intuit why someone would want to inherit it. Vaster than any sky he has contemplated before. So much depth that you wonder if it is only three-dimensional, or more. It has meaning, like the Panther's eyes. It talks to you. It reminds you that you are going somewhere. When you see this sky you are no longer a lost soul in free fall.

The perfect moment to ask Barkhan Seer for a less boring life purpose. "And so what am I doing in all this?"

"You are a weapon."

A good start. Being a weapon in Master Barkhan Seer's thirteen-thousand-year global strategy game is by far more enticing than being a HEL spastic on supervised rehab. He establishes eye contact, asking for more.

Barkhan Seer holds the young man's gaze, raising the Point-voltage far beyond the safety zone. "The Rex is a formidable adversary. To defeat him, the Archive people have prepared a formidable weapon: the knights of the Apocalypse. We have carefully selected them, woven their Point and trained them, life after life. We have cooked them with the fire of intense ascetic practices. We have poured our forces into them, our Spirit – the nectar of the Archive power. Life after life, we have given them unreasonable assignments, pushing the limits of the impossible. We have tested them again and again, made their destiny cross many wars, not all of them violent. We have sent them to the worlds of the gods, where their Point was further chiselled and wrought by powers that make the greatest human sages look like little children. And finally, we have given them neurocybernetics, the culmination of fifty thousand years of vision, the sharpest weapon of consciousness ever designed. Have you heard of the 1st battle of Mercury, Bobby?"

"No."

"You'll learn about it at the academy. Colonel Varga was the commander in chief. He had less than 500 ships, and some 500 Scalene fighters piloted by his knights. Against them, the Rex had assembled a fleet of more than 5000 ships – a formidable armada on its way to invading the Philadelphias. Using the power of neurocybernetics, the knights maruded their way into the Rex's computers, and in six Earth days and seven Earth nights the entire armada was annihilated! Only 70 enemy ships were left, which surrendered to Varga. After this it took sixty years before the Rex dared launch another expedition against the Philadelphias."

Deep pondering, looking up to the stars.

Perhaps neurocybernetics can save him, after all.

2.17 Apocalyptic Penelope

From his meeting with Barkhan Seer, Bobby goes straight to the shooting ground. He feels like a man with a mission, a man who knows exactly where he is going and why. What mission? The details will come later. It's the feeling that counts.

Sam is waiting outside the door. When he sees Bobby, he jumps with jubilation and runs to welcome him.

"*Sit!*" Bobby Point-yells at him.

Taken aback by the display of Point-authority, the Saint-Bernard sits, looking up to Bobby, his tail sweeping the floor.

"Hunh!" Bobby shrugs his shoulders. "He's just a puppy."

He walks into the shooting ground and looks for Penelope. He finds her fireflying, illuminated by clouds of red and blue dots.

"Break!" he decides for her.

She turns towards him, worried and kind of puzzled. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Penelope, what's your maruding score at the moment?"

"Well, it's hardly a maruding score. When it's below 150, you're supposed to call it a Point-score. It wouldn't even allow you to marude a dish-washing unit."

"So?"

"137," she says.

"What do you need to beat that?"

"Stabilise myself over 22,000 during seven consecutive Fireflies and over 320 over seven consecutive White Lines, and either PPMS above 140 or Blackstar above 75"

Bobby doesn't know what Blackstar is but it doesn't matter, let's take them one at a time.

He announces, "Firefly: your reality, single, resting on dual Point-net. Take it?"

"Taken!" Intrigued, she looks at him like he's really sexy today.

"I take MC-ship. Ready?"

She closes her eyes a few seconds, gathering energies in her Point. Then, "Ready!"

"Engage Point-pairing for the dual net!" he instructs. While she tunes into his Point, he tunes into Barkhan Seer's.

"*Master Barkhan Seer, I know you are an extremely busy man, but... would it disturb you if I drew voltage from your Point?*"

Instant answer. Point-communication is timeless. "*No limits, Bobby. That's what an initiate is supposed to do, all the time: draw power from his master. The more you draw from me, the more meaning you give to the Archive adventure.*"

"*Understood.*"

"Firefly!" Bobby invokes the hyper program.

Clouds of blue dots start flowing towards Penny. Bobby doesn't even bother looking. He closes his eyes and holds her Point.

A lovely Point, really. A bit shy, and not completely sure of its own goldness yet. But warm, and receptive. Welcoming him.

Soon he can feel her getting tired. Like a gravity in her Point, dragging her down. Bobby raises the voltage. Nothing lethal, but substantial enough. Why waste time?

The heavy sensation is dispelled, her Point lifted up.

Holding her is like reading her, neurone after neurone, but all at once. Her entire past folded in his Point, she dances above his head.

The cosmic dance.

Millions of presences in the motionless flow.

Their voices singing the song of creation.

Fifty thousand years of Archive vision above my head.

Truth and Fire, Fire and Truth!

Dancing on the edge of time.

Exhilarated, Bobby opens his eyes.

"Shit!"

There are thick clouds of dots coming from *all* directions: left, right, back, and even from the floor and the ceiling!

"Break!" he shouts.

Very straight, Penelope swiftly spins round to face him, as if dancing.

Penny?

Dazzling glow in her eyes. She's another person! Or perhaps not.

The myriads of dots fading, the space gradually becomes dark. He follows her eyes until the very end.

In the dark, he calls, "Score?"

"Penelope Heinzel scores 44,997 over extended period of 21 minutes 34 seconds, beating her own record by 20,110 points. New maruding score: 220, jumping up 83 points."

Oh... "But I thought that for your maruding score to be modified, you needed seven fireflies and seven..." he questions

"Not with that kind of score maintained over 21 minutes."

21 minutes. 21 minutes? Hard to believe!

Shit! That's not at all what Bobby had in mind. He thought she'd score 23,000 fourteen times in a row, or perhaps 23,500, and raise her maruding biz by 3 points, maybe 5. She'd jump and scream with joy, take him in her arms, tell him he's wonderful. And he'd mention that by the way he's made up his mind, he liked the RR cuddle, feels ready for another one, now would she please excuse him he has important matters to attend, see ya later bye.

But now...

Suppose she never makes it to 220 again. Suppose it's been cranked up from Barkhan Seer's side and she's left with the nagging memory of an achievement that was never hers, dreaming of reproducing it without ever...

"I take MC-ship," she interrupts his train of thoughts. "Single reality, no Point-pairing. You watch and do nothing. Take it?"

An easy deal. "Taken!"

"Firefly!" she invokes.

By the time the computer starts sending the dots, she's already turned. He can't see her face, but he can feel her Point coming to him.

Dancing above his head.

Boy, is the computer having a go at her! Blue clouds from all sides. How can she possibly deal with the dots behind her back?

In five seconds she has turned into a red statue wrapped in a wide orange-red glowing aura, deep-blue clouds surrounding her. Eerie.

She keeps it short, around 90 seconds. "Break! Score?" she calls in one go.

"Penelope Heinzel scores 45,002, beating her own record by 5 points."

Amidst the slowly-fading luminescent clouds, she swivels round slowly, like she is still dancing. There's a different person in her eyes, a newcomer who looks at him with curiosity.

He searches for words. "How does it make you feel, Pen?"

It is dark, now.

"Apocalyptic!" she says in her normal voice, and she mindswitches a function Bobby has never seen before: backward replay of the last firefly action. It makes her glow, fiery orange clouds radiating from her, turning blue as they draw further away.

A statue of light. Splendid and mysterious.

But where is little Penny?

The statue makes him an offer: "How about a White Line? Single reality, all yours, Point-paired with me in the background. Take it?"

Not now. Too dangerous.

He shakes his head. "I'm on my way to Colonel Varga."

She doesn't insist, just smiles. Not at all like her smile.

2.18 Marked with the seal of the beast

Understand. Then conquer.

"While I'm doing all this understanding, isn't there something I could start conquering?" Bobby inquires. In TS5's virtual campus, he and Colonel Varga are sitting on a bench under Teyani's chestnut tree.

"Feel the presence of Thunder in your Point. That, you can do right now. You need not wait," Varga is sitting utterly straight, relaxed, never leaning against the bench.

"Master Barkhan Seer's presence?"

"Of course. And Master Szar's too. Between you and him, there is something profound. It will take some time before you discover how profound."

Another bit that doesn't yet fit in the puzzle but rings damn true.

"Back to understanding," Varga resumes. "This is how Teyani of the White Eagle first introduced me to neurocybernetics: 'It has two purposes: clarity, and vision.' That took me very much by surprise 'And what about supermind, hyperlogic and maruding?' I asked her. 'All of these are but byproducts of clarity and vision,' she replied. Frictionless mental processes and super-fast responses rest on the clarity of the astral body, and hyperlogic rests on archetypal vision – Point-vision."

Essentially, what Bobby understands about the astral body is that his own has been wrecked, gunked and polluted in all imaginable manners by the Rex's Hyper Reality.

"For you, Bobby, it's not difficult to conceptualise that consciousness is not just the product of the RR brain, and that you exist independently of your physical body."

The understatement of the Saturnian revolution cycle. If anything, Bobby has difficulty conceptualising his consciousness has *anything* to do with his RR carcass, which he first objectified only six months ago.

"Defined in the terms of neurocybernetics," Varga pursues, "you are a flame of eternal Spirit surrounded by a cloud of mental consciousness. The cloud is the astral body, the seat of thoughts and emotions."

Which explains why Bobby never felt that flame. Clouded by such toxic astral black smoke, what do you expect?

"So what does the RR brain do, in all that?"

"Acting as a receptor, the brain reflects the mental consciousness of the astral body. And the other way round, it transmits sense impressions to the astral body."

"Now to Hyper Reality." Varga opens his left hand flat in front of Bobby, "The cultivation of the astral body through Hyper Reality rests on a simple, yet essential principle: the astral body is constantly fed by the senses. An analogy taken from ancient Archive-lore compares the mind, or astral body, to a sea," Varga points to the palm of his left hand. "The senses are the rivers that feed the sea," he says, pointing to the fingers. "Living in the physical world, consciousness is flooded with impressions coming from the senses."

"And what about people who live in VR?"

"Same principle. The only difference is that VR signals bypass the sense organs, they are sent directly into the cranial nerves and the brain. Which makes them even more powerful: they are poured straight into the astral body, without the filtering that normally takes place in the eyes, the ears and other sense organs. Now..." Varga is interrupted by a large, green virtual chestnut falling off the tree, narrowly missing Bobby's VRR head (and therefore his RR head too). VRR is a dangerous reality, Bobby is starting to learn.

"Now, what's the difference between VR and HR? VR feeds macro-information to your astral body: images of objects, people, landscapes, etc. Hyper Reality not only includes macro- but also micro-information: subliminal signals with a structural impact on your consciousness. In neurocybernetic terms, HR signals modify the very substance of your astral body. This is where the HR of the knights and that of the Rex have diametrically opposed effects: the knights' HR is aimed at clarifying your astral body, turning it into a transparent vehicle through which the Spirit shines. The Rex's HR makes your astral body dark, opaque and thick, smothering the Spirit and its light. Let me show you something," he stands up and sets off to the labs.

Bobby follows him. "So what about me? How come I can help my friends improve their maruding score when my own fireflying is so pathetic?"

"Fireflying and similar hyper programs are activated through a mindboard. To shoot a blue dot, you must first send an impulse from your Point. Then the impulse must travel through your astral body, after which it reaches the brain. The brain activates a mindswitch, or a combination of mindswitches. Then, assuming you have triggered the right mindswitches,

the computer turns the dot red. In your case, the astral body is the weak link, it twists the transmission of Point-impulses. But when you help your friends, you tune into them directly from Point to Point, giving them your strength."

"But then it's not as bad as I thought!" Bobby is in a glorious mood today. "All I need is to clear up my astral body!"

Reserved attitude on the colonel's face. "The knights' HR algorithms are exceptionally powerful, raising consciousness to supermental summits – hyperlogic blows all the ceilings of the mind. But the HR of the Rex is a no less powerful drag into the abyss."

Makes Bobby feel like a battlefield.

"What you need to understand about your present condition," Varga pursues, "is that your astral body isn't just fogged with chaotic muck. Otherwise, with all the HR signals you have been exposed to since you met Szar, you would already be clear by now. The HR of Hyper-Earth Link has crystallised some extremely nasty structures inside you. Sheer evil. Not just foul and vitriolic – horrendously resistant. Whether we can break them without breaking you remains to be seen."

Bobby turns pale.

"Tss, tss!" the colonel tells him off. "You react, you die!"

"Dead!" Bobby nods.

They have arrived at the VR labs building. It's a busy day, there are students walking in all directions. In the main corridor of the ground-floor level, Bobby notices another clone of Colonel Varga, and a group of students led by a Brown Robe man. "Who is that one?"

"Master Woolly. Szar's brother-disciple." Turning left, Bobby's Varga takes him into a smaller, empty corridor. They reach what looks like a hospital room. "I thought you'd be interested to see this."

Only one bed. A young man, emaciated, pale like a corpse, lying prostrate with a feverish look, huge dark rings under his eyes. *Very* disturbed.

"This happened long ago, in the early days of VR, before HR was invented. A number of people like him became severely depressed. This one was dying, actually. The reason was simple: VR signals incompatible with his personal neurocybernetic profile. But in those days no one paid much attention to the quality of VR signals. It led to major VR epidemics, with millions of people showing major mental disorders."

Through a door at the back of the room, Varga takes Bobby into a large lab. In the middle of a sea of equipment, a blonde woman lying in bed. Motionless. Her eyes closed. Hundreds of electrodes are stuck on her head, linking her to a VR machine through an antique mindboard. "She's having virtual sex. Have you ever heard of Fourier analysis, Bobby? It has to do with splitting a wave into its subcomponents." To demonstrate, Varga conjures up a huge dancing wave. "That's the graph of the VR signal that reaches her mind. It is composed of all these wavelets," Varga enlarges a

series of graphs showing smaller waves of different aspects. "Meaning that the big wave is the sum, or combination of all the wavelets."

"Now I change the VR signal into HR. Same virtual sex for her – from her point of view, nothing has changed. But look at the analysis of the signal."

Bobby doesn't notice anything special on the graph of the HR wave. It just looks like a wave. It's when you look at its Fourier analysis that it becomes striking: the wavelets are remarkably regular, showing harmonious repetitive geometrical patterns.

"The signal is no longer a mess, it is pure structure. And personalised: the HR machine tests the woman's brainwave response and adjusts the signal accordingly."

"So what does that do to her?" Bobby asks.

"It's food for her intelligence. This particular signal works at building up her IQ, developing abilities for maths and abstract thinking – the beginning of superastrality."

"So when she wakes up, she'll be smarter?"

"It takes a few months. Subtle bodybuilding is a gradual process. This particular hyper program isn't very powerful because unlike those of your shooting ground, it doesn't require the active participation of the user."

"So in this case it doesn't make any difference whether she's having sex or doing anything else."

"None whatsoever," Varga grins. "With passive HR, macro-information is only a pretext for broadcasting subliminal signals. These were rather primitive algorithms, by the way. HR has come a long way since then. Want to see the very latest? Come and have a look at what our great guru of neurocybernetics has prepared for you."

Intrigued, Bobby follows Varga through another door, "Who is that great guru?"

"One of the most powerful knights of TS5. His name is Mat."

They have arrived back at Bobby's cabin. The Gardens of Babylon have been switched off. Within the four blank walls, on one side there is the gravito-field in which Bobby's RR body is lying, and on the other side the mattress, covered with Penelope's duvet.

On the pillow of Green-Goose-337 feathers, there's a sleeping Siamese cat.

"Bobby," Varga makes his voice emphatic, "let me introduce you to one of the most powerful hyper programs ever conceived. I'll leave you to it."

"Wait, wait! What am I supposed to do?"

"I have no idea. Knowing Mat, it could be anything. Anything!"

2.19 The master maruder cat

Left alone, utterly perplexed, Bobby contemplates the cat that's supposed to be stronger than the hyper-evils of the Rex and undo the ugly knots in his astral body.

"Come on, cat, make me a free human being!"

At first sight, the saviour is just a cat. A classy Siamese. White fur, black paws and a black tail, his long body artistically half-curled across the pillow, one paw folded under him, one straight in front of him, his eyes closed. A he, judging by his back side. Difficult to know if he's deeply asleep or pretending, like cats do.

Bobby sits on the mattress. "Pss, pss! Pussy! Hello?"

No response whatsoever.

Using the Point, Bobby tries to shake the animal's feline indifference and wake him up.

Mat's cat remains totally unconcerned.

Maybe it's one of these passive HR progs you're just supposed to look at.

Or maybe not. Tentatively, Bobby brings his hand close to the beautiful creature. But as he reaches him, the cat hisses and scratches him.

"Fuck!" Bobby recoils, shocked. It's a deep scratch, it hurts. It's bleeding, red drops falling onto Penny's white duvet. "But fuck! This is VRR!"

In the gravito-field, his hand is bleeding too.

The damn cat isn't even looking at him. He's back to pretend-sleep, as if nothing had happened.

"Medicomputer, first aid!" Bobby calls.

No response.

Wave of anxiety. "Medicomputer, quick, stop the bleeding!" he yells.

The computer doesn't take action.

Bobby contemplates the blood on his right hand. Who can he call? Daniel? No, Szar.

The door opens. The Master of Thunder walks in. "In trouble, Sir Bobby?"

"There's something wrong with my medicomputer. The hyper-cat attacked me, and..."

Bobby realises that Mat's cat is no longer on the pillow. Disappeared!

"No malfunction in the medicomputer," Szar concludes his instant analysis. "However, an inspection conducted from the central network shows the medicomputer has been programmed to let you bleed. Blood analysis shows you have just been administered a small dose of cortrax 45, an anticoagulant. Strangely, there is no entry in the medicomputer's logbook."

"Meaning?"

"The drug prescription didn't come from Dr Fawlers or any member of the medical staff, but from a mysterious person with top-level clearance over this side of the network. Even if *I* wanted, I couldn't make a drug prescription without leaving an entry in the logbook. Bobby... you've just been maruded!" Szar flexes his left forearm horizontal and looks down to his fist. Clench. Unclench. Clench... "What was this cat, exactly?"

"I don't know! It was programmed by a guy called Mat. Colonel Varga calls him a great guru."

"Mat Donohoo. I know him. I'll go and ask him for instructions."

Because of the urgency of the situation, Szar decides to stay here at the same time. It's the advantage of being a computer clone: you can be in as many rooms as you want all at once.

Clench. Unclench...

Expectably, the bleeding is getting worse. It's the first time Bobby looks at an injury with concern. This time it's not VR (where cuts, wounds and broken limbs are rather fun). And it hurts!

"Medicomputer, send me a cocktail!" Bobby invokes.

Nothing. No painkillers. The medicomputer is sulking.

"Ho!" Szar laughs with outrage.

Mounting anxiety. "I gotta get out of here before this thing kills me," Bobby says, watching the blood that keeps dripping onto his duvet.

"Wait."

"Did you find Mat?" Bobby asks.

"No. Mat isn't on Titan, he's on an assignment. Top secret. It's so classified that no one can even *ask* where he is: any request made to the central computer is erased before you finish sending it. And Mat's cat isn't to be found anywhere. I've located entries mentioning its existence in a few logbooks here and there, but for some reason the hyper-program itself isn't held by *any* of the computers of TS5's network."

"I'm getting out of here!" Bobby sits up in his gravito-field, grabs his softmetal suit, starts putting it on.

"Wait, Bobby. You've asked for this. Now that it's happening, I wouldn't suggest you try to avoid it."

"I haven't fucking asked for this kind of nonsense!"

"You've asked Master Barkhan Seer and Colonel Varga to help you clear your astral body. Now that the powerful medicine has arrived, you are going to have to swallow it."

"This is not powerful medicine, this is system failure!"

Clench. Unclench. "All right. Do what you want."

Fully dressed, bleeding Bobby stands up and mindswitches the gravito-field off. "Penelope?" he sends an emergency VR call. "Can I come into your bedroom?"

Penelope is at the shooting ground, in the high spaces of the White Line. She interrupts her trip. "Come into my bedroom? Hum... what kind of visit are we talking about: VR, VRR or RR?"

"RR!"

"But I didn't expect any RR visitors, it's..."

"Pen, it's urgent. Please!"

"But..."

Funny she's so fussy, suddenly. "Pen, I've wounded myself and my medicomputer isn't responding. I need help."

"Well, let's call a doctor, then. Daniel will..."

"Pen!" he insists. "I need to get out of my room. Fast."

Reluctantly, she yields. "Okay. I'll join you there in a minute." You can see it's costing her.

"Do I have to worry about the dog?"

"Don and Molly took him jogging. Today is their shift."

That's a relief. Bobby winks at Szar, "See you there!" He switches VRR off, making his friend disappear, and walks out into the corridor, drops of RR blood dripping onto the RR floor.

From a distance, Penelope has opened her door for him. So as not to infringe on her privacy, he mindswitches off all virtualities and walks into her naked RR room. Simple courtesy. Bobby isn't nosy.

But... surprise!

He was expecting to find four blank walls and a mattress.

There is a mattress. On a low bed. But there are also two chairs, a table, shelves with rows of rag dolls, teddy bears, little wooden boxes and antique RR objects. And the floor! The floor is covered in dresses, dirty clothes and silk cushions. There are also packets of biscuits, unpaired shoes, plates with food leftovers, interesting underwear, more teddy bears, baskets and bags of various sizes, and other unidentified objects. It all forms a thick layer, unevenly spread, approximately one foot high.

So this is what a RR bedroom is supposed to look like!

Bobby has to think of a way of reaching the end of the room.

He does his best to walk only on soft things but not on food, mindswitching the gravito-field from a distance. The translucent cocoon appears, but not on the ground – how could it? The cocoon's bottom is hanging in the air, half a metre above the mess. Bobby grabs a large basket, levelling the terrain by pushing piles of clothes and trampling on others with his boots. He secures the basket and steps onto it.

Finally, he reaches the gravito-field and lets himself collapse into it head first, legs following. No problem, the gravito-field can take care of all landings. Smoothly.

"Medicomputer, first aid! And I want a cocktail!"

Feels so good to lay the carcass horizontal. He contemplates his right hand, waiting for the sweet drug flow.

But there is something wrong. By now, the hand shouldn't be bleeding any more. And the pain should have disappeared.

"Oh, shit!"

Hardly believable.

Penelope walks into her room.

"I can't get the damn medicomputer to stop my hand from bleeding!" he tells her.

"Let's take you to a doctor."

Bobby is starting to understand. "I think we should call Szar first. And Colonel Varga, perhaps."

"Master Szar and Colonel Varga in here?" Penny chokes.

"Let them perform a thorough analysis of your medicomputer. This story is getting more and more interesting."

"Bobby, please! Don't call anyone! And... Oh my God, you've put blood everywhere. Oh..."

"Yes, I told you, it's why I came."

"Bobby..." she's on the edge of tears.

At that moment, Szar forces his way into their reality, switching them into VR. Pure VR: the bedroom disappears, replaced by a large empty hall with a tessellated floor of black and white tiles. There, Penny is standing, still on the edge of tears, and Bobby is lying in a VR replica of Penny's gravito-field.

"Hi Pen!" Szar beams. "Look what I found, Bobby!"

Trotting by his side, Mat's cat.

2.20 Close contact VRR

"*Fight for your destiny, man of the Law, not against it!*" Szar has convinced Bobby to let his hand bleed. So, with Penny's help, he returns to his cabin, where he finds the cat lying on his GG-337 pillow.

Bobby's instructions are to stay in VRR. Let the cat do his business.

A dangerous cat. "Does he really know what he's doing?" Bobby questions.

"Trust Mat!" Szar is adamant.

Szar files a report about the maruding incident. It's compulsory, nothing personal against the cat. Not that maruding is forbidden in TS5. On the contrary, TS5 students are encouraged to try to marude each other's systems as much as they can. And if they succeed, they get a distinction, 1,000 credits of extra spending money in their account, and a personal invitation to dinner from the leader of TS5's anti-maruding teams (any restaurant of their choice within three hours of Saturn) – so goes the tradition. But it doesn't happen often, because TS5 has the most shielded computer network this side of the solar system: state-of-the-art protection algorithms (hyper-logic, grand style), and four teams of anti-maruding experts on non-stop red alert. They're the ones who read the reports, investigate, and pay the restaurant bill. No one does anti-maruding better than the knights, simply because no one does maruding better than the knights. Understandably, since they invented it.

While Szar is filing the report, the hyper-cat looks him in the eyes, as if amused.

One hour later, the cat strikes again. Szar and Bobby had agreed to call Dr Fawlers, just to check that the bleeding was medically tolerable. Ten minutes before Dr Fawlers arrives, the bleeding stops. Dr Fawlers can't find anything wrong with Bobby's medicomputer, nor any trace of anticoagulant in Bobby's blood. And ten minutes after she leaves, the bleeding starts again.

Szar has to file another report.

Now VRR-Bobby is sitting on the mattress. He stares at the cat, who is blissfully asleep on the pillow. Every minute or so, a drop of blood falls onto the duvet. In the gravito-field, Bobby's RR hand loses a drop of blood too.

The pain in his hand isn't getting better. It radiates up his arm, making him feel nauseated.

Penny sends him a VR call, "I just came back from jogging with Sam. When he doesn't get his sixty minutes, the poor puppy becomes restless. Want a visitor? I mean me, not the dog."

"Please!" It comes out like a distress call.

"How do you want me: VRR, VR or RR?"

"I'm in VRR."

So Penelope VRR-transports herself into Bobby's cabin, dressed in preparation for the bleeding: a S24-silk strawberry-coloured dress. Her hair is done in an interesting way, like she has more of it. "Oh my God, you look terrible! What did the doctor say?"

"She said there's nothing wrong with me." Bobby prefers to change the topic. "Did you find out more about this Mat?"

"Sort of. Mat Donohoo, age 28. Has completed two PhDs: one in neuro-cybernetics, one in genetic engineering. That's where it gets interesting: the topics of both PhDs are top-secret. So are the names of his supervisors, the marks and the maruding scores with which he graduated, and the whereabouts of his cabin. He is part of an alpha-alpha choir, the name of which is classified, and there is no picture of him in the students' database. Now, guess what's written in his psychological profile? Only two words: 'Likes privacy.' Thank you very much, we had already guessed this! If you want to know more you'll have to ask the cat. Mister cat, would you like to tell us something about Mat Donohoo?"

No.

Bobby is feeling sicker and sicker.

Pen sits by his side, takes the wounded hand on her lap. "Do you know what happened to choir beta-omega Saint-Bernard during our first cathartic phase? A cathartic phase is when you are exposed to HR signals designed to release hidden crap from your astral body: emotional encapsulations, traumas from past lives, etc. It was *wild*! Anna, Don and I spent an entire week crying in each other's arms. Paul broke his leg. Molly nearly committed suicide. Sam went mad and bit John's calf so badly he had to have surgery. And Chang and Celine left the academy. Took us six weeks to recover. I shouldn't be telling you this now, with this hyper-cathartic cat right on your pillow!"

Again, Bobby finds himself in her arms without having noticed how it happened. Sweet. But not exactly the same as last time. "I think I can feel the difference with a RR cuddle," he tells her. For a moment, it makes him forget the nagging pain in his arm, the nausea, the seal of the beast, and the rest.

"There's something about RR cuddles, isn't there?"

"Absolutely. Shame we have to stay in VRR for the cat."

"Actually... would you like me to show you something recreational you've never tried before?"

This time he believes her. It makes him laugh. "Please! Please!"

"One moment!" She fades and disappears from his reality. Thirty seconds later, she walks back into the room, via the door. This time she comes with her RR body, dressed in the same haemorrhage colour.

She closes the RR door, mindswitches the red light. Instead of sitting by Bobby's side on the bed, she walks to the gravito-field. "Some people call it close-contact VRR," she says, dropping her shoes and lying in the gravito-field by Bobby's RR body. And she re-enters Bobby's VRR. Her VRR body walks towards his, dressed in her VRR strawberry dress. She sits on the bed, takes him in her arms. In the gravito-field the two RR bodies are huddling against each other, just like in the VRR bed.

"The best of both realities," she explains.

"Mm...!" Sweet. Sweet like a cocktail.

Shame he could never fall in love with her.

2.21 Blood and tears, mourning Hiram

Waking up in the middle of the night.

A woman is walking, her feet in his time track, her head in the stars. He and she have a rendezvous with destiny. Bigger than the Sun. But now Bobby is walking his time track backwards, so how will they ever meet?

"Don't leave me in the dark! I need you!" he screams. Again and again. "You're the smart one! Find me!"

If only he could know her name. She's not Teyani. Is she the Panther?

His screams are muffled by the night's indifference.

Back home, at the lake. He walks the three steps to the veranda at the front of the log cabin.

What's Mat's cat doing here? "Go away! Go away!"

The cat won't budge.

In the night they fight. Bobby's forearms are covered in scratches. Ugly. More blood.

There is a woman. She is standing straight like a pillar of heaven, watching. Her compassion is boundless, but she won't intervene. The time hasn't come. It's Teyani. Of course. How could she not be here when he is in trouble? Her presence is with him, always.

Always.

Tonight she isn't wearing her White Eagle's dress. She is clad in a black cloak.

She is mourning a man, a beautiful man. His name was Hiram. The Rex has destroyed him.

Bobby and the cat are rolling on the floor. He is bashing the cat's head. The cat's claws are ripping his chest.

"Panther, help!"

There is no such thing as far away.

She is with him, immediately. "Merely memorising the 27 primary system areas of the Scalene's eyeboard isn't enough," she tells him. "You must touch each part of the eyeboard with your hand, repeating its name out loud and with intention. Do it over and over again. This way the architecture of the command system sinks into you – not just your head, in your energy. When you learn something with your hands, it becomes part of your very substance. A maturation takes place in the depths of your being."

"Area one, central reactor," Bobby says, touching the corresponding part of the holographic eyeboard. "Area two, left reactors. Area three, right reactors. Area four..."

Meanwhile, he's still fighting with the cat. It's wild. They have fallen off the steps, they're rolling on the grass in front of the cabin. Bobby's chest is lacerated, blood dripping onto Penny's breast. She's taken off her dress. She is deeply asleep by his side in the gravito-field. Her skin is warm.

Wait a minute, how can he be in Penny's arms while all this is happening? It *must* be a dream.

Wake up!

Of course, it was a dream! Now the fighting has stopped, Bobby finds himself in front of Teyani. He can only see her eyes. Glowing like the night sky of the World to Come, to remind him he has a soul.

The intensity is shattering, it brings up an immense wave of distress. "What has the Rex done to my soul?" Bobby starts screaming with the pain of the world, beating his chest. There is a chasm of grief, he is right at the bottom of it.

Penelope wakes up. "Bobby?" She sits up in the VRR bed, where she is still wearing her red dress. She puts her hand on Bobby's shoulder, tries to shake him awake. But he doesn't respond. He keeps vociferating, locked in his dream, eyes wide open, staring.

Right in front of him on the bed, Mat's cat is poised like a sphinx, perfectly still, his grey-green eyes gleaming, wide open.

"Bobby, wake up!" she shouts. Using her hands she forces his head away from the cat.

The screams stop. But the pain of being separated from Teyani is unbearable. He turns to the cat again, looking for her.

He finds only a pair of cat's eyes. Serene and enigmatic.

Back to (Virtual Real) reality, Bobby is panting, beaten by the violence of the dream, devastated by the grief. "What has the Rex done to my soul?"

Penelope mindswitches the light on. "Oh my God!" she is horrified. Bobby's arms, chest and neck are covered in scratches. For one second she feels revulsion and anger. She wants to hit back at the cat. But Szar's instructions were crystal clear. She contains herself, dims the light, opens to her friend.

After such a fight, Bobby isn't surprised to find so much damage on his body. But normally, shouldn't dream realities fade when you wake up?

What's happening? Disoriented, he decides to mindswitch all virtualities off, which leaves him in the gravito-field with Penelope.

In the dark he holds her RR naked body against his, ignoring the pain, covering her in blood. "I'm losing it, Penny. I feel totally out of control."

She makes herself vast, holds him in her arms.

"How can a VR dream leave RR marks?" he questions.

"VRR was on. The cat must have scratched you during your sleep."

"But this dream felt so virtual! More virtual than VR."

She smiles, kisses his cheek. "You mean more real than reality?"

Bobby can't get himself to find RR more real that VR. More than a perception, it's a philosophy.

For now he feels like a small boat on the ocean, rocked by huge waves. "There is too much darkness, it's swallowing me. I'll never get out of it, it's getting worse and worse."

"No, no, there has been a great improvement already."

"What?"

"Now, you can cry."

As she says it, he realises. He is in tears. Crying a flood of tears, and not even thinking of the ON's inspectors, their depression scale and their redballs.

We're gaining ground. It *has* to be the cat.

"Now we follow Master Szar's orders, we go back to VRR," she says, and they find themselves back in the bed.

This time, she isn't wearing her dress.

2.22 The Rex on his way to the outer planets

In the morning, Bobby wakes up feeling like he's swimming in black pitch. He can't move, every single body part is aching, even those the cat hasn't lacerated yet. Opening his left eye, he discerns a knight's shape standing beside the bed, behind the wall of smoke.

The black smoke in his head.

"Hi, Pen!" he closes his eye again.

"It's not Pen, it's Lieutenant Semper," a male voice answers.

Bobby recoils and jumps. What's this thing he is supposed to say when addressed by an officer? He sits up, back straight. "Yes, *sir!*" he shouts, copying the way Pen answers Szar.

"To the Point, Brother Knight," Semper says in a gentle, relaxed voice. It's the way a superior greets you when he wants to be friendly.

"To the Point, Brother Knight!" Bobby answers in a stiff, formal voice. It's the way you show respect to a friendly superior. But then Bobby realises he isn't wearing anything, only covered by Penny's duvet. He instantly mindswitches himself dressed in a softmetal knight's suit.

"Sorry to intrude into your reality, Bobby. I'm part of the anti-maruding team who received the reports filed by Master Szar yesterday. I *really* wanted to see this," Semper points to the cat.

The cat is sitting on the bed, defiantly facing Lieutenant Semper, interposed between Bobby and him.

"You're very welcome, sir!" Doing his best to see through the smoke, Bobby can't discern more than a thin man, not very tall, with short hair, probably blond.

"A fierce little guardian you have here!" Semper comments with undisguised admiration. "She protects you like her own cub. Each time I try to come near you, she manages to switch me off your reality even though I have total security clearance over this part of the network. Superb maruding work."

Meaning that while Bobby was sleeping in, there's been an awesome maruders' battle raging in his bed. And by the sound of it, Mat's cat won.

"I erupted into your VRR without warning because each time I have had to deal with this cat before, she's vanished as soon as I announced my arrival. But this time she doesn't even seem to care if I see her."

"He, sir! It's a male," Bobby corrects him.

Semper is amused. "I hope you realise this little marvel is one of the most fantastic weapons of all times, Bobby. The Rex's scientists would give anything to have access to the algorithms behind it."

Reassuring, in a way. Gives the idea that the cat *does* know what he's doing, after all.

"All right, I have all the info I can get for the moment," Lieutenant Semper concludes. "I'll see you in twenty minutes in Saint-Bernard's meeting hall. A special communication to the choir."

"Yes, *sir*!"

"Get well, Bobby," behind the wall of smoke the lieutenant waves his hand, and his image disappears in a clear-cut exit.

Bobby collapses on the bed, overwhelmed by the darkness. "Help! Szar, please, help! I am not..."

Before he can finish the sentence Szar walks in, bringing with him the warmth of the Brown Robe. "TOP, Bobby. How are you feeling?"

"Hi. I feel..." The black smoke in his head is so awful it's beyond words. "Now I understand why the last escapee of HEL who joined TS5 died after three months."

Szar comes and sits on the mattress. The cat doesn't switch him off but stays interposed between him and Bobby. He is sitting, licking his paw to give himself a busy countenance while watching Szar carefully with his peripheral vision.

"Friend, there is good news," Szar announces in his softest voice. "The catharsis process is engaged. For weeks, I have been sending you HR cathartic signals without any substantial result – the evil crystallisations in your astral body remained unscathed. Mat's cat has cracked the shell. Now the undoing of the Rex's evils has begun."

"This black smoke is going to kill me. What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Let it come out of your system. Remember you're not alone. This is team work: you and the Masters of Thunder. Go into the Point, offer the smoke to me, offer it to Barkhan Seer. Trust! We stand by your side. The power of the Archive is awesome."

"The muck is too thick, I can't even feel my Point."

"Semper and I will work on it this morning. Before twelve, your Point will be back." Said in his no-one-fucks-with-me voice. "Bobby, believe me, I know you, you are a fighter. You have the resources to overcome this."

"A fighter, me? Ha!" The cynicism of someone who'd prefer to be dead.

Penelope sends a call, "Are you awake Bobby? We're waiting for you, it's an important meeting."

"I'm not sure that I can come," he tells her. "I'm not..."

"He's coming!" Szar rectifies and switches off the call. "It's essential you keep moving. If you let stagnation take over, you're finished."

Bobby contemplates the dark ceiling of his 3 by 3, cell-looking cabin. Since the cat has arrived, the Trompe l'Oeil Reality has disappeared. "I can't even find the strength to mindswitch myself over there," he mumbles. "Maybe I should ask the cat."

Instantly, the cabin disappears, Bobby finds himself sitting around the table in the small VRR meeting room, opposite John. All the choir members are there but before he has the time to say hello, Sam explodes into furious barking and rushes under the table.

Then blank. The barking abruptly stops.

Intrigued, they all look down under the table, searching for the dog.

The dog has vanished, but sitting by Bobby's legs, there is Mat's cat. He is licking his paw, busy washing himself like cats do, and as if nothing had happened.

"Aren't you beautiful!" Anna wonders.

"What's happened to my dog?" Wave of anxiety in Penelope's voice.

"Someone must have switched him off our VRR!" Paul spells out the obvious.

They watch the cat avidly. After what Penny told them about him, nothing could surprise them. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Semper has walked into the room, unnoticed. "To the Point, Brother Knights!"

They all jump up, abandoning the under-table "To the Point, Brother Knight!"

Now they're all standing straight. Semper bends down under the table, curious. "I see! We have a visitor."

"Be seated!" he tells them, standing up and grabbing a chair for himself. "You must have heard the news that came during the night," he begins his speech. "Colonel Perry has asked all choirs to discuss the information, and the consequences. Watch this. It's a communication we received at 02:24, Titan time. It came from Raven's Nest, a mining station at the inner edge of the asteroid belt." He wipes out their VRR and instead, conjures up a VR recording.

A man dressed in a grey uniform appears, his eyes glowing with fear, "This is an emergency call! Captain Armatree from Raven's Nest to all stations. We are under attack! More than 400 Z fighters have launched an offensive against us this morning at 01:26 Outer Planets Standard Time. They are being followed by 7 Quark-class frigates, 2 Aristotle-class carriers, and 12 freighters. All we have to defend ourselves are 21 batteries of phasers only good to pulverise asteroidic pebbles, and a small shuttle-fleet of.."

The meeting room reappears. "All communications with Raven's Nest were interrupted at this point," Lieutenant Semper comments. "Meanwhile, the Outer Planets' Central Command received a communique from Hyper-Earth Link stating that 'action was being taken to liberate the oppressed people of Raven's Nest in response to their repeated requests for help'. It's always been the Rex's tactics when targetting a station: rally a handful of supporters to the cause, get them to scream loudly they want to become part of Hyper-Earth Link, then send in a fleet and take over. There were 35,000 people on Raven's Nest. Most of them are probably still alive, but now under the control of Hyper-Earth Link. There is nothing we can do for them at this stage, they have never been part of the Outer Planet's Alliance. Any rescue operation would escalate the conflict into an all-out war against Hyper-Earth Link."

"And what if they *were* part of the Outer Planet's Alliance, Lieutenant?" John asks.

"Precisely, Brother Knight, this situation might occur very soon. Until now, all stations in the asteroid belt have kept away from the Outer Planet's Alliance, to avoid infuriating Hyper-Earth Link. But Raven's Nest is the fourth belt station taken over in the last eight weeks. Evidently, the time for diplomacy has run out. In the last 12 hours, 174 stations of the asteroid belt have petitioned the OPA for membership. Quite likely the OPA will accept. Then... anything could happen, and fast! The Rex has gathered 5,000 ships in the belt. They may be tempted to strike immediately. Any attack would signal the beginning of the war with Hyper-Earth Link. Even if they don't attack, OPCC will have to send troops to protect the new member stations, meaning our fighters will find themselves dangerously close to those of Hyper-Earth Link. Any skirmish could set the entire region on fire. So Colonel Perry wants you to be clear about this: whatever politicians may say, the question is not whether an all-out war will take place, but when."

No great surprise in the room. Apart from Bobby, everyone in TS5 knew that very well.

"All graduated choirs have been placed on yellow alert," Semper continues. "As far as you are concerned no major change, your training continues as planned. The only difference is that TS5 academy could be bombed any time. We rank high on the list of military targets, were the Rex to decide to bypass the asteroid belt and strike the OPA directly. So no more frolicking in Titan's mists, guys. Everyone stays underground until otherwise speci-

fied. Apart from that, follow the news closely. We'll know in a matter of days how many belt stations are joining the OPA. Do you have any questions?"

Something goes click above Bobby's head. His Point has come back, shining with Szar's presence and the gold of the lineage of Thunder. Lieutenant Semper establishes eye contact with him.

Boy, talk about voltage! Lieutenant Semper is a Point-powerhouse. Bobby takes a closer look. A knight in his mid-twenties, thin athletic type, sharp angular features, short blond hair, gleaming grey-blue eyes – not unlike Mat's cat's.

"Lieutenant," Molly asks, "when are we scheduled to begin the training in hyperlogic?"

"Now for the good news," Semper answers without smiling, without moving his head, keeping eye contact with Bobby, "since choir Saint-Bernard's Point-scores have improved so dramatically in the last days, Colonel Geneva and I have decided you will begin hyperlogic in the coming days."

They all rejoice, clapping their hands. Except Bobby, who can't move because Lieutenant Semper has plunged mountain-deep into his consciousness, through the eyes. The others ask questions which Bobby doesn't even hear, and Semper answers them.

Now Bobby is somewhere else, no idea where. The voice is there.

The voice, which says, "*With all my heart, with all my mind...*"

It's her voice.

The voice of the woman he will meet in the Sun, for the rendezvous with destiny. She is there, he can feel her presence. She is speaking to him.

What she says, he cannot hear.

"Please, help! Help me! What am I to do?" he Point-calls.

"*Thank him.*"

"Tomorrow, Colonel Varga and Colonel Lee will visit your choir. It will mark the beginning of your training in hyperlogic," Lieutenant Semper concludes the meeting.

When he stands up, they all stand up. Except Bobby, who is too far away.

"*Thank Semper for what he has done for you!*" the voice whispers to him.

Bobby has no idea what it means but there is nothing he loves more in the world than this voice. So he bolts up, "Lieutenant!"

Semper stops in the doorway, looks at him.

"Thank you for what you have done for me."

A flash in Semper's eyes. "I stand by your side, Bobby," he says.

So much love in Semper's eyes – the ignited love of a warrior. Bobby is startled, his eyes fill with tears.

The lieutenant gone, Paul asks, "What has he done for you?"

Bobby has no idea. Deeply moved, he collapses on his chair, Point-searching for his voice. No success, it left with Semper.

The others are celebrating, shouting loud. Hyperlogic is the gateway to maruding. Learning maruding means becoming a knight of the Apocalypse. They have made it to the threshold! They congratulate each other, hug each other, except for Penelope who is trying to bring her dog back into the room but can't. The computer plainly ignores her orders to VRR-switch the Saint-Bernard back.

Paul looks down under the table, "It would *have* to be the cat screening him out."

"I'd better go and check that Sam is all right," Penny decides, and she leaves the room.

Don doesn't hide his feelings. "I think you should bring your cat more often," he tells Bobby.

"Bobby," John comes over, "as the choir's MC, I must express our profound gratitude for what you have brought with you. We're well aware that without your support, we wouldn't be where we are today. Praise the Great Apollo for bringing you here!"

"Yeah!" they all approve in one voice.

Tears are rolling down Bobby's face. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be reacting."

"No, no!" Don protests. "You-react-you-die – that applies only when you're on duty. The rest of the time, you can cry and crash as much as you want. You should have seen us in cathartic phase!"

All in one voice, "Yeah!"

At that moment, Bobby realises why he had to thank Semper. The black smoke has disappeared. His head is completely clear.

2.23 The foundation of the Philadelphias

Next, a class on transpersonal motivation. Today the guest-speaker is Alan Branberg, one of the father-founders of the Philadelphias. While they wait for Penny, Bobby enjoys the greatest moment of his existence.

Clarity. Vision.

An immense sky. Revelation Sky. He can see forever. Past and future gathered in his Point, he comprehends all directions at once.

Above him, a golden Sun, more gigantic even than the sky.

This is where the rendezvous will take place. Praise the Great Apollo!

Teyani is standing by his side. This time she is wearing her White Eagle's dress, her black hair untied, falling straight onto her hips. "See," she tells him, "Hiram isn't dead!"

Hiram is living. For ever and ever. Aeons and aeons.

The woman. She is dancing in his time track.

"I want to know her name," he asks.

"You are the Earth, she is the stars," Teyani answers.

"Please, Teyani!"

"Szar will give you the key to her name."

Penelope rushes into the meeting room. "Sorry, friends! Sam was feeling terribly dejected. I had to do something to cheer him up. Is the cat still here?"

All in one voice, "Yes!"

"Doesn't matter. I've asked Lee Kuang of the Golden Pill choir to take Sam jogging. He should be all right for the moment," Penny reassures her friends.

"So we can start. At last!" John sends a call and Alan Branberg soon walks in. They stand up to greet him.

Dressed in an antique suit, all white, a white rose attached to his lapel, he is a tall lion of a man, with mane-like dark beard and hair. "Sit down, please!" he invites them, and sits at the table with them. First, he asks their names and which stations they are from. When he hears that Bobby is an escapee from Earth, he stops and looks into his eyes with emotion. No words are exchanged, but something clicks between the two of them. Then he inquires, "I had been told to be ready to face a huge beast that can eat two rabbits for breakfast and a lamb every four days. Where is it?"

"He's gone jogging," John cuts a long story short.

Finally, the story begins. "I have come to tell you of one of the great adventures of humankind, one which started in the second part of the 21st century and the early part of the 22nd century. At that time, Earth Link wasn't yet Hyper-Earth Link. No one had yet been compelled to full-time Virtual Reality. There were of course virtual addicts, but their lifestyle was from their own choice. Life conditions on Earth were the best they had ever been. The environmental debacle of the 21st century was starting to be mopped up. The planetary culture had unified most of the mosaic of nations and ethnic communities. Old diseases like cancer had disappeared. Organ replacements were coming of age, so no one was left blind or crippled. Of course, the new plagues were spreading fast: Chronic Fatigue Psychosis had already hit hundreds of millions of people, and so had Immune System Collapse Syndrome and the infertility plague. But altogether, the mood was high. Humanity was looking forward to a bright and happy future, enjoying the many wonders of technology. This context is important, it tells you the drama of my life! See how beautiful the Earth was," he says, conjuring a quick succession of rainforests, waterfalls and other spectacular landscapes.

"How do these images tell us the drama of your life?" Molly asks him.

"Because I had to steal these treasures away from those who wanted to follow me. I had to ask them to give up everything Mother Earth had to offer, and go and live in miserable orbital stations where the best home they could aspire to was the regular 3 by 3 cabin, and where children grew up without ever touching a real tree or putting their hands in real dirt. You have no idea – *no idea* – how much it cost me, how much guilt I carried. The Archive had inspired me to found communities away from the Earth. I had been shown dreadful images of the future – how the Rex would take

over Earth Link, how human beings would be enslaved in VR. Still, at the time all this remained speculation. What if it never happened? Who was I to know."

Branberg speaks with so much heart, Bobby feels the Golden Sun expanding forever above his head. Between sequences of images, they exchange emotional glances.

"Look at these people, they were the first to join my utopia," Branberg conjures up scenes where small groups of men and women, mainly dressed in white, are holding gatherings around bonfires under the stars, and temple meetings. "They were simple people. Not top-level warrior-scientist-initiates like the knights, just good people. I united them around the dream of a better world, a utopian community of heart, an open door to the World to Come. I didn't want to create a gospel of fear. I always tried to keep the message positive, inviting them to leave the Earth and move closer to the Sun, to establish a society based on compassion and brotherhood – Philadelphia is a Greek word which means 'brotherly love'. Love, there was in plenty. Right from the start, the togetherness of these people was magnificent. It was magic, filled with presence, just as predicted in the Revelation of John: *Write to the angel of the community in Philadelphia and say, 'The words of the holy one, the true one, the one who has the key of David, so that when he opens no one can close, and when he closes no one can open. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.'* Little power, how true!" Branberg laughs. "Right from the start, we never had enough money. This enterprise was a financial chasm! Each time we managed to raise capital, something went wrong. It took more than fifteen years before the first space station could be built! From this point of view, things haven't fundamentally changed – the Philadelphians are still the poor cousins of the solar system."

Branberg VRs more images of Earth landscapes: mountain ranges, tropical beaches, oceanic panoramas. "Everyone judged us mad. I had to put up with constant attacks and criticisms of the kind, 'Why don't you go to the Pacific and build a floating island for your people? Let them breathe real air, and enjoy real fish!' With time it became more and more vicious and personal. The media called me paranoid, a dangerous cult leader, a madman. They said I wanted to imprison a generation in space rabbit holes to fulfil my own ambitions. The sceptic brigades filed four consecutive lawsuits against me. I was arrested twice. While I was in jail, young people set fire to my house. My son was molested. Despair was a daily companion. All I had was my faith in the message. I knew it was crucial to take my people away from the Earth. The Bible itself had predicted it, in Revelation 3.10, in the letter written to the angel of Philadelphia: *Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you out of the hour of trial which is coming for the inhabited Earth, to try those who dwell on the Earth.* Amazing how literally this prophecy was fulfilled! Had we lost faith

and not taken off to Mercury's orbit, our children would have been trapped in Hyper-Earth Link."

There follow images of old-fashioned looking space stations. "Finally, we made it: Philadelphia 1 and 2, orbiting around Mercury. At the time, it was impossible to buy land on Mercury itself. The mining companies had completely taken over. We had nothing, nothing but brotherly love! We ate miserable food synthetised in labs. We lacked the most elementary medical facilities. We hardly had enough VR machines to educate our children. But our rituals were magnificent. These were the days of the Cathar renewal, when many of our people had found their spiritual roots in the ancient spiritual wealth of the Cathars, the Albigenses – movements which flourished in 12th and 13th century Europe. We kept the Spirit alive. Precisely because we had nothing, the only way we could survive was by giving everything."

Images of Amy come to Bobby's mind, she who gave him a reason not to let himself die. He remembers her 3 by 3 'place' and the kindness of her smile. "What is the significance of the white rose?" he asks.

"It symbolises the purity of the heart. Because this was all we had when we began, we chose it as our emblem. Like the purity of our hearts, it hasn't passed. It has remained the symbol of the Philadelphias. To all of us, it means... *a lot.*"

Molly wipes a tear off Bobby's cheek. She rests her head on his shoulder, making him feel like a human being.

Under the Golden Sun, his head is filled with parallel images of Amy, Szar and the Panther. Giving everything, this is what heart is about, he realises.

A much more substantial space station appears. "Now, recognise this place?" Branberg asks.

"Philadelphia 12!" they all say, apart from Bobby.

"Right! Built 31 years later. I had already died. Philadelphia 12, where the mysterious order of the knights of the Apocalypse originated. Until the 1st battle of Mercury, no one had realised who the knights were. They lived in great secrecy, training their pilots, selling genetically engineered products. Using hyperlogic, they had deciphered many DNA secrets and created all kinds of new animals, foods and substances that brought some sunshine into the harsh daily reality of the Philadelphians. It was the end of food rationing. Thanks to the knights' space-goat, everyone had real milk and cheese. More than luxury, it was bounty from the gods. Literally. And it was by selling their genetic wonders to the rest of the solar system that the knights financed the factory where they built their newly designed combat craft, the Scalene."

"Yeah!" Enthusiastic handclapping in the room.

"Yeah!" Branberg claps his hands with them. "I will leave it to Colonel Varga to narrate how the knights saved us during the 1st battle of Mercury – one of the greatest battles of all times." He brings a quick succession of

images of people and stations, "Now there are more than 120 Philadelphia stations spread across the orbit of Mercury, and about twice as many settlements on Mercury itself. We are still poor, but we are free. Our Spirit lives."

Crying the tears of a free man, Bobby stands up and walks to the guest speaker. Through the infinite clarity of Revelation sky, the Golden Sun speaks, "I want to thank you, Alan Branberg."

The lion stands up, takes Bobby's hands. "Thank you, my friend. I know your grief."

"Just as you have given everything, I want you to know that I too will give everything for the Philadelphias."

Alan Branberg takes the white rose from his lapel and gives it to Bobby.

2.24 The dog

Let's not wait a minute – straight to the shooting ground.

"Want to Rollercoaster with me?" Penny offers.

Bobby isn't supposed to play the Rollercoaster hyper-program. His ribs haven't completely healed.

"No, I want to see you firefly. I find you very beautiful when you turn into a statue of light. Point-paired, single reality, your shot. Take it?"

She pulls herself together – not the time to be moved. "Taken!"

One minute of Point-pairing. Tender gold. Then, "Firefly!" The tempest of blue dots is unleashed.

She becomes the statue, first blue, then red in a dark-blue sea. She Point-dances above his head. One with him. So much better than virtual sex!

He is tempted to raise the voltage. In the Sun above his head, there is No-Limit Point-power. But would she cope with it?

Keep it gentle. For the moment.

"Break!" she shouts, turning toward him. "Today you can beat me, I know! Will you firefly with me?" The Golden Sun is shining through her eyes. "Please!"

Hesitation? No. It's the Apocalypse! "How about White Line? Point-paired, single reality, my shot. Take it?"

"Taken!" She brings total darkness, with just the hair-thin golden thread above Bobby's head.

Short phase of Point-pairing.

Hiram was a mighty knight. Barkhan Seer was his teacher.

Invoking, "White Line!"

Bobby takes off, moving straight up along the thread like an arrow of fire. Breathtaking acceleration. Myriads of realities crossed in the twinkling of an eye. White light, flaring, illuminating the space. Then gold. Gold everywhere.

Bobby is in the Sun.

Child of immortality, he keeps ascending, laughing. It's obvious, this hyper-program was designed from within the Sun! A gigantic presence, an angel of light, is laughing with him. "Yes, obvious, isn't it?"

White Line is not just a drill, it is a communion. With the Solar Logos. A gateway to the matrix of all angelic presences.

Hiram is bleeding in the Sun.

Ascending through world after world, infinity after infinity.

There are millions of presences, and there is only one presence.

All at once, Bobby is the world and that which is beyond all worlds.

Then crash. No warning.

First a cosmic blank. The hush at the beginning of creation. It lasts a few aeons packed in a split second.

Then all light withdrawn.

Hiram's corpse.

Left in abysmal darkness.

"Break!" Penelope screams. She rushes to take him in her arms.

In the dark, he has fallen on his knees.

"Bobby! Bobby, what's happening?"

Suffocating. Caught at the bottom of a pool of crude oil, desperately trying to reach the surface.

"Master Szar! Help!" she calls.

Szar switches both of them back to the VRR of Bobby's cabin. He VRRs Bobby into his bed. Pen VRR-sits by his side.

"I don't know what happened," Penny tells Szar. "He was doing remarkably well, and... suddenly, the Point-power collapsed."

"Medicomputer, diagnosis?" Szar invokes.

"Diagnosis is not yet established. The blood level of pancreatic amylase is twenty times normal values."

"What does that mean?" Penelope asks.

"Means he's vomiting his new pancreas," Szar looks down to his left fist, thinking. Clench. Unclench. Clench. "Let's transfer him to the hospital." So that Pen can follow, he speaks the order, "Cabin 4-17-201 to central hospital, I need to organise transport for an emergency."

No response.

Szar exhales loudly, passes his right hand through his curly locks, glances at the cat who is sitting by the cabin door. Clench. Unclench. "I can see why this Mat gets on some people's nerves."

"Do you mean the cat has cut us off from the hospital?" Penny is shocked.

"Correct." Clench. Unclench...

"Let's take Bobby ourselves. I'll organise a gravito-litter."

"No. The cat wants him here."

Penny becomes nervous, "But if we leave him here, he might die!"

"Yes." From Thunder, he looks into her eyes, "But if we take him to hospital he might die too. The pancreas is *not* the problem."

Her Point set spinning by the presence of Thunder, Penelope takes a dive into silence.

The door opens. RR Lieutenant Semper walks in. "Sorry, Pen, I'm going to have to disconnect all virtualities." Before Pen has time to finish "Yes, sir!" she has already been switched off. Semper walks straight to the gravito-field, where RR Bobby is lying.

The cat forces VRR on, imposing himself and Szar back into Semper's reality. Semper doesn't mind. After a quick inspection of Bobby's aura, he declares, "I agree, better leave the medical staff out of this one."

"We should wake him up. Keep him in his body, or we might not be able to bring him back," Szar says.

"Agreed!" Semper programs the medicomputer to inject a dose of neuro-stimulant. Almost instantly, Bobby opens his eyes.

Still drowning in crude oil, he hears Semper's voice from a distance, "Follow the thread, Bobby! I am in your Point. Move towards me. In the sky, towards the Sun."

The sky is dead. The Sun has never existed. Only death. Sleep.

Hiram will never return.

"Bobby! Bobby! In your Point, the light!"

Light? What does that mean? There is no light. Just the pit.

But Teyani, the wise woman, is by his side. "Up there!" she shows him.

A tenuous, uncertain thread of light. He hasn't the strength to move.

She takes him by the hand, pulls him up. A long journey through spaces of boredom and sickness, heavy with the filth of a tired world.

"Bobby! Here! This way!" Semper calls him.

Teyani takes him to a vortex and sets him spinning. A long, long tunnel. At the other end, his cabin, and Semper's luminous blue eyes. "Here you are, Brother Knight!" Semper smiles. "Welcome back to TS5! Listen, I want you to stay awake. So, I am going to switch you onto a VRR-VR split. Know what it means? You feel your RR body as in VRR, but each time you want to move or speak, VRR turns into VR so your RR body remains still. Got it?"

Of course. At the Loggia station, it's what they do with terminally ill escapees. Those who'll never be able to move but still can think.

In VR, Bobby knows what to do. Dressed as a knight, he sits up. Behind a curtain of thick clouds, he guesses Semper's face.

"Penny!" Szar VR-calls, "We're sending Bobby back to you. You're in charge of him."

She is quite distressed. "Yes sir! Is he all right?"

"He needs you to keep him awake until late tonight, and if possible in touch with his body. Can you do that for him?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Your best... is not that bad, Pen! I mean it."

"Thank you, sir," her voice is shaky.

Next, Bobby finds himself in the meeting room. Everyone else is in VRR. His friends don't notice he's in VR but they do notice the blur in his eyes, like he's not completely with them.

He takes his place behind the table. "Please, no fuss. When I don't feel my RR body, I'm fine."

While the others are looking at the cat under the table, John announces, "Bobby, we have something extraordinary to tell you."

Bobby feels like a pile of toxic waste, thick smoke pouring out of his head. He sees an unidentified knight walking into the room. "A new communique from Outer Planets Central Command has just been released," she says. "Another 16 belt stations have been accepted into the OPA, bringing the total of new members to 47."

"Thank you Mirra, keep us posted," John gives her a quick smile, and while she walks out he tells Bobby, "Penny has analysed your last White Line sequence. Bobby, hold on to your inertial dampers, you scored in the 121,000's! But that's because the counter kept running after you crashed. Penny checked what the score would have been, had you stopped just before that: 163,449! That's... about four times Anna's record. A professional score."

They're all back above the table, looking at him, clapping their hands.

He remembers the Sun. It seems like so long ago. Vagueness.

She. Wonderful she. Why isn't she coming to his help?

"Patience!" Teyani tells him. "You *will* meet her. My word!"

In the gravito-field, Semper is working on his RR body.

From the World to Come, Barkhan Seer is pouring Thunder into Semper.

"Want to make a speech?" Paul invites Bobby.

"Shut up!" Molly shouts at Paul. "Leave him alone!"

Hiram was a Voice master. He knew how to enthuse an audience. Restore hope. He left his keys at No Limits.

"Okay," Bobby stands up, "I'll make a speech."

From the World to Come, Barkhan Seer is pouring Thunder into Bobby.

The smoke is fading. It's the Apocalypse.

Bobby lets Teyani speak through him, "In the heights of the White Line... when you get there, it's gonna blow your ass!" And he sits down.

They all laugh, giving him an ovation.

But that was not at all what Teyani wanted him to say! What went wrong?

"Okay, we move!" Molly decides. "Next on the agenda?"

John inhales a deep, deep, deep, breath. "Penny, it's about the dog."

"What about my dog?" Penny frowns, red alert mode.

"Penny, we just can't go on like this. It's becoming a major embarrassment with our guests," John begins.

"And much worse, it's getting in the way of our concentration," Don continues. "Sam constantly drags us out of the energy."

"And he's dangerous!" Paul adds. "How are your ribs, Bobby?"

"And I had to have surgery on my leg," John reminds her.

"Not to talk of what happened when Margaret Thatcher came to visit!" Paul says, outraged.

"But... but..." Penny turns towards Anna for help.

"Sorry!" Anna shakes her head sadly, "I know saints are supposed to be forbearing, but having to go jogging with him one hour every three days is just fuckin' getting to me."

Pale – *very* pale – Penny chokes, "You're not going to tell me you want to get rid of Sam, are you?"

"Penny," Molly pulls down a padded, post-mortem counsellor's voice, "they're right, it's getting unmanageable. Unsupportive of our goals."

"But Sam is a fantastic dog! And he hasn't finished growing up yet!"

"Precisely, that's part of the problem," John points out.

Penny bursts into tears. "But you can't ask me to abandon my dog just like that, because you don't like him anymore!"

Molly tries to take her hand. "Pen..."

Penny pushes her back. "It's too cruel. I can't abandon him!"

John stands up, "Penny, we all had to make painful sacrifices to get here. If we want to raise ourselves to knighthood..."

"Fuck you!" Penny sobs, "I'm not going to abandon my dog!"

Heavy silence in the room, apart from her sobbing.

Pulling himself from far away, Bobby is thinking deeply, looking for a plan to rescue his broken-hearted friend.

"All right, you're all against me, I can see," Pen tells them. "If it's like that... I'll resign from the academy! I'm leaving. With my dog."

"Oh, shit! Give us a break!" Anna takes her head in her hands.

Molly walks to Penelope, put her hands on her shoulders, "Penny, for God's sake, Sam is only a *virtual* pet!"

A virtual pet?

"And so what if he's a virtual dog!" Penny explodes. "To me he's real. To come here, I've had to leave my Dad, my Mum, my brother and my boyfriend. Sam is all I have left! He's an amazing friend, he looks after me, he holds me together so I can go and play your fucking war games and get butchered by the Rex..." she cries big tears.

"Hum..." Bobby feels it's time to fly to her rescue. "If Sam is virtual, couldn't we reprogram him a little bit?"

"What?" Penny stares at him, horrified.

"I mean... I mean just for the group-meetings... Or..."

"Anyway, it's not an option," John intervenes. "Sam is a more-real-than-real dog-program. He can learn within his own limits, but there is no way his original programming can be modified."

"He's just like a real person, with his own, unique personality!" Penny adds. "He can learn, like you and I, and he *will* learn. But like you and I, he has his own nature, and that's just the way he is! We have to respect this."

Don's turn. "Pen, I love you dearly, I hate to see you under the flotation line. But from a space of caring... I don't think it is wise for you to let a virtual pet take on so much importance in your life."

"Fuck you and your caring!" she cries. "Go to hell!"

"Precisely, as an escapee from HEL, I would like to tell you a story." Bobby looks for a Point-flow, then initiates the most horrendous summary of his virtual childhood ever: how the Omnipresent Network isolated him from his mother when he was four and left him to grow up with only virtual clones while black-smoking his astral body beyond recall, and the redballs each time he wanted to cry, and the dirty fat ugly woman strapped in his RR bed during all these years, and all the rest. He keeps it short, concise. A few minutes later, when they're all on the edge of tears he concludes, "I know it's silly, but you have no idea how much I miss Sigfr!d. I still can't figure out why he meant so much to me."

No one dares add a word.

Finally, Don turns to John. "The verdict, your honour?"

John closes his eyes, wishing he'd never been the MC. "Adjourned!"

2.25 Hyperlogic

VRR Bobby is lying on his bed, watching the HR Siamese who's in a perky mood tonight, racing from one side of the cabin to the other as if pursuing an invisible virtual mouse not part of Bobby's reality. He disappears through one of the cabin's VRR walls, reappears through the opposite wall, jumps onto the bed and hides under the duvet.

When the cabin's RR door opens, he bolts out from under the duvet like a torpedo, nearly bumps into RR Penny, disappears into the corridor while RR Penny walks in wearing a stunning black dress, 3D looking fabric, fractal make up on her eyes.

Clearly, she's making an effort.

He isn't sure how to greet her accordingly. "How was your jogging?"

"I don't wanna talk about the dog," she says, "I need a cuddle, can I come into your gravito-field?"

"Please! I switched off the VRR-VR split. So, I'm VRR here for you."

"So, you're getting better!" She drops her dress on the RR floor and before he has the time to see she isn't wearing anything underneath, she lies by his side in the gravito-field, reappearing on the VRR bed. Wearing her dress.

Hiram's spirit of immortality was crushed, trampled. Only specks of light are left, wafting through remoteness.

In a corner of the room the cat is jumping up and down. Penny watches him while she's waiting for RR Bobby to take her in his RR arms. While she keeps waiting, she also notices a small 3D photo of a woman, standing by the VRR bed.

"Who is she?"

"It's a VR recording from Amy. Made two days ago. The Panther and Szar managed to smuggle it through the blockade for me."

"Your friend Amy? How exciting! Can you VRR move?"

"Yes, I feel all right."

"Good!" She takes his RR left arm, puts it around her shoulders, slides the shoulder-strap of her VRR dress down her RR arm so his RR hand

touches her RR shoulder. Then she takes his RR right arm, does the same while resting her RR head against the VRR Sun on his chest. Cuddle engaged. "So what did Amy say?"

"Don't know." His RR cheekbone against her RR hair, he creates a cocoon of darkness by pulling the VRR duvet onto them while mindswitching on the red light over his RR door. "I haven't watched the message yet."

Undoing his VVR softmetal suit, she lightly touches his RR chest with her RR cheek. "Why not?"

"Makes me kind of anxious. What if I didn't like her as much as I used to?"

"But why? Do you think she's changed?"

"No. *I* have changed. She was the first RR person I ever met. Now..."

Biting with her RR teeth, she pulls his VRR suit open, "Now you've become far too sexy to talk to a little rehabilitation officer, is that it?"

"No!" he shouts at her and mindswitches her out of his reality.

In the gravito-field they are still in each other's RR arms, but that's not what they see: in VR, each of them is lying on the bed alone.

She's not worried, it's not an uncommon situation for virtual lovers.

Without consulting each other they both pull to their own side of the gravito-field, push their own VR duvet away and look at the HR cat that's rolling on the floor, purring, then jumps up again and races out through a wall.

She tactfully waits a few seconds, then mindswitches herself back into his reality. "I'm sorry!" she pulls the VRR duvet back onto them. "Does it hurt to think about Amy?"

"Yes it hurts!" he shouts. "Pen have you noticed? Each time I do something special like Point-holding you so you beat your records, you look at me with big eyes, you virtually like me. What if I *never* did anything special? Would you still talk to me? Maybe it's the same with all real people, including me. If you're not special they don't like you."

"Yeah, what if you were a complete fuckwit with neo-neo-Nazi kind of ideology and no taste whatsoever for music?" she comes back close and tenderly rubs her RR face against a spot on his RR left shoulder which the HR cat hasn't ripped yet. "Would I still like you?"

"It's not funny, Pen! What is there in my Real Reality apart from Amy, Szar, the Panther and you? Not a great deal! Suppose I don't like her any more, it's a net 25% of my universe that collapses!"

She sits up, tears in her eyes, "Bobby... I am deeply touched and... honoured you count me as 25% of your world."

"Who said I gave you 25%?" he protests, pulling her back against him.

"Ouch!" he screams. In her fall, she pressed against a badly cut area of his chest.

It hurts her, more than it hurts him.

A sea of broken glass. The precious elixir of life was spilled. The Flying Dragons remember Hiram. He left his keys at No Limits.

When he can speak again, Bobby continues, "Maybe *you* should watch the message and tell me if I'll like her. If you're not sure, I won't watch it."

"Taken!" she sets off to her side of the gravito-field and out of his reality.

Bobby finds himself alone in the bed, thinking. Thinking of his pancreas which, Szar told him, is holding fast thanks to Lieutenant Semper's healing. Whatever that may mean. Thinking of his last maths lessons – a debacle. It's not just that he doesn't understand... the formulae make him sick, they bring the black smoke back into his head. Who would have suspected that mathematics could be cathartic, just like hyper-cats? Thinking of the abyss of darkness that lurks behind him, arms wide open. How easy it would be to yield to the infamous mistress. Just let go of the light in the Point one second, and farewell! Szar warned him, huge ups and downs are to be expected, one hour jubilating at the centre of the Golden Sun, contemplating the World to Come from above, the next hour agonising at the bottom of the pit. That's how it goes with catharsis.

But what's Penny doing? Must be a damn long message. Or maybe she's watching it a few times to reach an authoritative opinion.

Bobby gets bored. Remembering his choir is about to start hyperlogic, he decides to seek clarification – he isn't even sure what the word hyperlogic means! He takes off to the engineering labs of TS5's virtual campus, looking for Colonel Varga.

"Stop!" Daniel the presenter, standing in front of him with a cool grin. "Bobby, I can't let you come here in VRR with Penelope Heinzel in your gravito-field!"

"What's that?"

"Too dangerous, Bobby! Close-contact VRR is fine for frolicking but if you each go your own reality, you must either partition the gravito-field or switch to VR. Otherwise you're going to bash her up without even noticing."

Of course. VRR has all the nasty sides of RR.

"I'll go VR, thanks," Bobby says, and he walks through Daniel, thinking he doesn't like this clone's attitude.

In the lab he finds Shankar Rashi working on a Scalene's eyeboard expanded to its maximum degree of complexity – a superb holograph, slightly smaller than a family of elephants.

The small Indian man with dark skin waves at him. "Hello, Bobby! How is life, my friend?" he says with his high-pitched voice and his interesting accent.

"Could probably be worse." It can *always* be worse. "Listen, Shankar, have you got a minute? I need a briefing on hyperlogic."

"Oh, beautiful!" Enthusiastic, Shankar takes Bobby walking through the eyeboard's holographic circuits until they reach the core: an open space where they can see each other again. "Let us start at the beginning, my friend. Do you know what hyper-space is?"

"Of course! Jumping from one part of the galaxy to another! I've done it many times." Cousin Sigfr!d commanded a large fleet of starships.

Shankar frowns, "You mean... in Virtual Reality."

"Can't you go through hyper-space in RR?"

"No, not yet. I wish we could. We'd beat the hell out of the Rex!" Shankar laughs. "Now, what's a hyper-link?"

"A link from one part of a VR program to another."

"It lets you jump from one place to another without having to watch what's in between, just like hyper-space lets you jump from one point to the other without having to travel all the way. Now what's hyperlogic?"

Bobby makes a guess, "Jumping to conclusions, perhaps?"

"Very much so! Bypassing steps in a logical sequence. Reaching solutions instantaneously, without having to work your way step by step through the problem. Discovering hidden links between things, revealing synchronicity. Hyperlogic is one of the functions of supermind, the knights' supreme Point-weapon. Why do you think there are pilots in our fighters?"

Bobby has often wondered. Why not just leave it to computers? "Perhaps because all little boys want to become pilots," he suggests.

"How perhaps very true, my friend!" Shankar laughs. "But there are some other reasons. Being trained in hyperlogic, our pilots can make decisions that take the Rex's computers completely by surprise. And they can anticipate the movements of the enemy, which is immensely helpful when it comes to shooting them."

Immensely helpful indeed!

"But what about the pilots of the Rex, do they use hyperlogic too?"

"They couldn't! With all their brain reconstruction and organ replacements they're half-human, half-machine – the Point is foreign to them. Anyhow, the fighters of the Rex are not piloted by human beings, only by computers. And thank God, the Rex's scientists are light years behind us when it comes to neurocybernetics and hyperlogic. See, the knights' hyperlogic comes from an ancient tradition. The Masters of Thunder had perfected it as early as the old continent, Atlantis, where it was called 'power of the Point'."

Penelope turns up in the engineering lab. "Bobby? Where are you?"

He and Shankar are immersed in the holograph. She can't see them.

"We're inside the eyeboard!" he calls her. "Follow my voice!"

"I listened to the message," Pen says, walking through the holographic circuitry. "Boy, does this woman love you!"

"I think I have to go," Bobby tells Shankar. "Thank you, it was limpid."

"Come back to chat any time, my friend. Hyperlogic has always been my favourite topic. To build the Scalene fighters, I had to use it intensively."

Bobby switches Penelope and himself back into the VRR bed, under the duvet. "Is the Rex a computer?" he asks her.

"Why d'you ask me that now?"

"Because I'm shit-scared of what you have to say. Now, please don't change the topic all the time. Is the Rex a computer?"

She finds his sincerity disarming, takes him in her arms. "No, the Rex is a dark force, a fallen angel. Satan. The beast."

"Where does he live?"

"That's a tough one! Normally, angels don't have a physical body. But some say that the Rex is now incarnated as the Antichrist in a genetically-engineered body made from a large selection of chromosomic stocks, not all human. His gestation didn't take place in a female womb, but in a bionically-modified ass' womb floating in the middle of a gigantic mainframe."

"Now *that's* being a beast! Does he live in Hyper-Earth Link?"

"Some say he lives in New York but it's unlikely. It would make him too vulnerable. The knights believe he resides in a capsule lost in space somewhere between the orbits of Pluto and Proserpine. No one has ever been able to locate it. It's from there that he extends his consciousness into the computers of the Omnipresent Network. Now, can I tell you about Amy?"

"No. Tell me something else..."

"Stop it, Bobby!" she yells at him, "Amy is beautiful, she's all that you love about the Philadelphias!" Throwing the duvet away, she activates the small 3D picture, making a full-size image appear in the room's reality.

"Hello, stranger, my real friend!" Amy looks nervous, twisting her hands. Her soft look falls on Bobby's eyes and follows him as he gets up. Messages are programmed to do things like that. "I hear from Commander Elyani Serah you are now enrolled in a prestigious military academy, training with the top guns and already earning three times as much money as I do! The little magard I left in a transmission coffin has gone a long way. I don't know who you are now. I would *love* to see you..."

Bobby frowns, interrupts the message, leaving Amy's mouth open in pause mode, "Do I earn money?"

"Of course! 3,450 credits per calendar month."

"How come? I'm not doing anything for anyone."

"It's because in combat zones, 70% of fighter pilots die before they reach age 27. The least they can do is pay us well!"

Paid to die young. "I see." Bobby hyper-jumps to a quarter of an hour later in the message, drawing an exasperated sigh from Penelope.

Amy is now lying on a lavish gravito-armchair. By her side, a table with a gorgeous virtual bunch of white roses. "...living on the edge. All the time! My Philadelphia station is only 4 hours away from Philadelphia 6, where the Rex has gathered over a thousand ships. How long before they go on the offensive? It's the favourite topic of d..."

Pause mode again. "When did the Rex invade Philadelphia 6?"

"Ten years ago. Bobby, don't be an asshole, it's a *beautiful* message."

"Pen, suppose instead of playing poor little girl you stayed on TS5. How would you feel in six months if you received a message from your dog?"

"You *are* an asshole!" she shouts at him, splits the gravito-field in two compartments and VRRs herself back into her cabin.

The Flying Dragons remember Hiram.

2.26 Raining at the lake

Late in the night. It's raining at the lake. The shower has caught Bobby by surprise. Soaking wet, he runs to the log cabin, his palm lightly touching the pine trees along the path. Arriving home, he jumps onto the veranda. The planks creek under his steps. He contemplates the door, taken by the sudden certitude that she is inside.

The woman who is walking his time track, her head in the stars.

Open the door?

What for? Hiram is dead. He will never return.

Raindrops keep falling.

But how can it be raining on the veranda?

Tears, blood and hope. Remember Hiram!

Opening his eyes. Back into the gravito field, RR Penelope in his arms, without her dress.

It wasn't rain, it was her RR tears falling onto his RR shoulder. "Can't you sleep?"

"No." She lets out a volley of sobs. "It's stupid to love a virtual dog like I do, isn't it?"

Who should a free human being love? Bobby doesn't know the answer. "Are you really going to leave the Academy?"

"I don't know. Would you miss me?"

Life at the academy without Pen? "The idea hurts." Badly.

"Me too!" Flood of tears. "I love you as much as my dog, Bobby!"

Boy! Frightening to be loved so much.

Forever love, Flying Dragon!

Forever love, Hiram!

2.27 Operation Hour of God

Outpost 4, 02:21 AM Philadelphian Time. Aboard the Adyar ship, captain Renaud is woken up by the loudest RR bang he's ever heard. His cabin shakes, he is thrown out of his berth onto the carpeted floor. The cup on his bedside table falls onto him, covering him in cold coffee. Sirens in the background, an emergency call follows, "Captain, that's it, the Rex's fleet is on the offensive. 23 battle cruisers, 91 frigates and 12 Cartesian-class carriers are on their way. Expected time of arrival: 93 minutes. The frigates are firing Job missiles at us. Outposts 5, 6 and 7 are also under missile attack."

It *had* to happen.

"On my way, Commander!" He grabs his white softmetal suit, puts on the trousers and rushes out into the corridor. In high emergencies, his place is on the RR bridge, VRR won't do. "Damage assessment?" he asks, running, putting his top on.

"Decks 7 and 8 are on fire. No major structural damage."

Another explosion shakes the ship, throwing Renaud onto the floor. "Fuck! Gamblin, what are you doing?"

"That wasn't a missile, that was deck 9, captain," commander Gamblin replies. "The ship is holding. The Job missiles are now under control. We're destroying them one after the other."

Renaud finally makes it to bridge 1, where his officers are standing around a holographic representation of the battle scene. On one side 12 outposts, each defended by 35 Philadelphian ships. On the other side, 500 carriers, three times as many battle cruisers and frigates, and the devil knows how many Z fighters.

This is only part of the armada. All around the orbit of Mercury thousands of ships are gathered, equipped with Hyper-Earth Link's latest technology. Once the outposts are eliminated, it will take them four hours to reach the main space. Then... God have mercy on the Philadelphias!

Consulting computer wall panels, Renaud wipes thick beads of sweat from his forehead. He realises he's left his boots in his cabin.

"The Z fighters! The Cartesian carriers are releasing their fighters!" Lieutenant Daniels shouts. A cloud of shining dots has appeared on the holograph.

This is where it's going to get ugly. Renaud holds his breath, waiting for the computer's assessment.

"241 Z-1 fighters on their way to outpost 4. ETA: 13.4 minutes," the computer's muffled voice announces.

"Suggest retreat, Captain. There is no way we can match that!" Commander Gamblin turns pale, contemplating the swarm of noxious dots. The Z-1 are brand-new combat craft. They've never clashed with Scalenes yet, but intelligence reports they're faster than any Philadelphian craft and packed with hi-tech weapons.

"Captain van der V&k to all ships of Outpost 4!" Through a VR communication link, a Viking-looking red-haired giant appears. He isn't dressed in navy-white but in an air-force black softmetal suit, with the large yellow Sun on his chest. "I'm launching a welcoming party of 40 Scalene fighters." As he speaks, dots are appearing on the holograph. They're coming out of the Rosenkreutz, the carrier from which van der V&k is calling. "Your orders are as follows: You're moving ahead, full speed, following my fighters. I want all your fire power concentrated on two – and only two – frigates, code-named Scum 1 and Scum 2." On the holograph, two of the incoming enemy frigates start blinking. "ARCTYC," he concludes, standing for All Relevant Coordinates have been Transferred to Your Computers.

The Akaba sends a distressed call, "Captain Enca, asking for verbal confirmation. Are you saying we don't even try to stop their ships? We move past them and focus only on Scum 1 and 2?"

That's if they can survive the onslaught of the Z-1 fighters, of course.

"Affirmative, captain!" van der V&k answers and terminates the VR.

Renaud isn't the kind of shit-head to dispute orders in the middle of action. "Engage speed 9.5, coordinates as received from the Rosenkreutz!"

"The Scalenes will engage the Z-1 fighters in 4.7 minutes," Daniels announces. There's fear in the young man's voice.

"I hope van der V&k knows what he's doing," Gamblin mumbles.

"Me too!" Renaud ponders, and quickly refocusses, "Torpedo bays 1 to 17 on standby! Daniels, lock the long-range scanners on Scum 1 and 2. Give us visuals as soon as you can. Lieutenant Philips, go to level 9 for a detailed damage assessment. Ensign Prudy, run to my cabin and get my fuckin' boots."

"Yes, sir!"

Eyes riveted on the battle scene's holograph, watching dots moving towards dots, thinking of his kids on Philadelphia 24. When the Rex's fleet is at their door, they have vowed to commit suicide. He knows it's probably what he himself would choose to do, but the idea makes him sick.

"The Akaba has been hit by a Job missile," Daniels announces. "Damage assessment on its way."

The Beowulf has been hit too," Gamblin adds. "All communications interrupted. Must be in bad trouble."

"Scalenes to engage the Z-1 fighters in 120 seconds!" Daniels says.

On one of the wall panels a double counter has appeared. On one side it says: 'Scalene, with '40' underneath; on the other side: 'Z-1, '241'. Written in red signs. At the top, DAU for Damage Assessment Unit.

"Your boots, captain!"

"Thanks Prudy." Renaud puts the boots on, watching the Z-1 dots closing in on the Scalene dots. "Lieutenant Travers, tactical assessment!"

"Unless the Z-1 fighters can be reduced by two thirds, Outpost 4 will not last more than 20 minutes, sir." Which means unless each Philadelphian pilot can shoot four Z-1 fighters before being shot themselves, the entire personnel of Outpost 4 will be dead in 20 minutes.

"The Beowulf could explode any second, sir," Gamblin signals. "Evacuation procedure is engaged. The Akaba will receive the rescue shuttles."

"Engagement in 30 seconds" Daniel shouts.

Everyone stops breathing, eyes fixed on the red counter.

In the engagement zone, aboard Scalene fighter Zebra-Lou, Colonel Harry Lee sends the final TOP impulse to the five choirs. Single reality, five sets of octagonal Point-pairing. Forty Points linked in a single net shaped as a hyper-sphere.

Ready to implement Kartendranath's triaxe manoeuvre.

A difficult manoeuvre. It requires holding the incandescent Point-ness of Revelation Sky while remaining totally still inside. Then the fire of Kartendranath's triaxe starts revolving along the hyper-surface of the net, uniting the brother knights in an exalted oneness of Spirit, awakening an all-comprehending hyperlogical vision standpoint.

From there, they can see forever.

But hypersynchronicity rests on supernatural stillness. If any of them allows *one* thought or *one* emotion to sway his mind, the Point-net collapses and the connection is lost. You react, they all die!

Colonel Lee's squadron has rehearsed Kartendranath's triaxe manoeuvre 9,564 times in the last three years.

Silence eternal.

Above them, Thunder.

On the bridge of the Adyar, a stupefied silence.

"God! This is... just impossible! Daniels..." Staring at the DAU wall panel, captain Renaud is panting, "Gimme a test on the Damage Assessment Unit!"

"Three DAUs confirm the same score, Captain."

"Ask the Akaba for their readings!"

To satisfy the incredulous captain, Daniels activates another wall panel, bringing up visuals of the bridge of the Akaba. There too, the flabbergasted officers are staring at their DAU counter, mouths wide open.

"Oh, fuck!" Captain Renaud is gripped by wonder, like the will of God has finally overtaken the second law of thermodynamics. "This can't be!"

A VR link is established from the Rosenkreutz. The red-haired Viking reappears, statue-still, eyes glowing. "van der V&k to all ships of Outpost 4. Confirming the results of our first engagement: Z-1 casualties: 241, Scalene causalities: 0, duration of the engagement: 3.1 minutes. Operation Hour of God has begun."

Awe-struck silence on all decks. Contemplating the wrath of God, no one even thinks of clapping their hands.

"My welcoming party is now on its way to the Cartesian carriers," knight Van der V&k continues. "We are expecting another wave of Z-1 fighters any minute. On our side: the Beowulf is destroyed, the Akaba is severely damaged and will remain behind. All other ships to go ahead at speed 9.5, torpedo bays locked onto Scum 1 and Scum 2. End of c..."

"Van der V&k," Renaud interrupts, "are you going to tell us what the hell is going on here?"

"New weapons. Secret weapons," Van der V&k remains laconic, following instructions received from Philadelphia 12. "Mothership 1's Central Command is about to make an official announcement. EOC."

"Incoming communication from Mothership 1!" Daniels warns.

A younger Varga appears, perhaps in his late thirties, with some hair on the sides of his head but none in the centre. There is an undaunted glow in his eyes, like his appointment with destiny has come and he isn't going to miss it. "Colonel Varga to the fleet. At 02:21 this morning, the fleet of Hyper-Earth Link has launched its offensive against the Philadelphias. Finally! Outposts 5, 6 and 7 are presently under attack by Job missiles launched from Cartesian carriers. In Outpost 4, full-scale confrontation is under way. Operation Hour of God has begun, which I will be directing from Mothership 1. As you must be discovering on your DAUs, our pilots are performing miraculously well. They are using new – and secret – weapons. Because of this new technology, in the coming hours many captains will be receiving orders which may seem strange. It is essential that you follow them. To the letter."

Colonel Varga stops the VR program, bringing the VRR meeting room back. "Thus began the Hour of God, the 1st battle of Mercury, 94 years ago," he tells the mesmerised beta-omega Saint-Bernard choir. Now Varga's appearance is the usual one, some twenty years older. He has brought Colonel Harry Lee with him to the meeting, an Asian man with luminous emerald eyes and a Buddha's belly.

"We called it operation Hour of God because it was the first time we used maruding technology against such a large fleet. We had no idea how we were going to perform," Colonel Lee tells them.

"And also of course because the very survival of the Philadelphias was at stake. Had we been using only conventional weapons, we didn't stand a chance. The Rex's fleet outnumbered us ten to one," Varga goes on. "So we fought with Spirit and supermind."

"But to tell you the truth, we had it easy!" Lee gratifies them with his oriental grin. "Precisely because it was the first time, the Rex's computers were found completely unprepared. We maruded into their superastral models like red-hot iron into butter. We found flaws everywhere. We detected their moves up to *seconds* before they implemented them. And we even maruded their machines into shooting each other."

"During the Hour of God, 22% of the Rex's casualties came from friendly fire and 'unexplained' navigation errors, such as five Cartesian carriers colliding into each other, destroying a total of 961 brand-new Z-1 fighters." Varga mirrors the grin. "And then there was Bobros! Look at this,"

Varga conjures up the startling image of a forty-metre wide glass tank in which a massive alien-looking shape is floating, vaguely reminiscent of a brain turned inside out. Outside the tank a team of men and women are working on virtual consoles and busying around. "A neural computer, grown from living tissues," Varga explains. "The Rex had code-named it BR-001-BXO. We nicknamed it Bobros, a name from ancient Archive legends. I would call this the Rex's greatest blunder ever. Precisely because Bobros was made of living tissues, we were able to push the maruding to

the extreme: we completely took over its proto-consciousness and made it play up with the antimatter stock in each of the 376 ships it controlled, all at once. The flare of the explosion was so bright, it was detected as far as Saturn."

"After this, the Rex *never* dared send us a warship operated by a neural computer again," Lee rubs his belly with satisfaction.

"Bobros had a little brother in another carrier, but alas, the Rex's admirals had him deactivated before we could marude it," Varga adds. "Anyhow, the carnage lasted 157 hours – a little less than 7 Earth days. Out of 5,243 ships, the Rex had lost 5,127. Out of 578 ships, the Philadelphians had lost 229! So was fulfilled for the first – but not the last – time the word of the Revelation of John, *Philadelphia... I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are righteous and are not, and lie – behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and know that I have loved you.*"

2.28 Plunket castle

Tough day at the shooting ground. Bobby isn't well, there's like a heavy weight hanging above his head. It makes the world feel thick.

Today, beta-omega Saint Bernard's first hyperlogic exercise. It's called Plunket castle. Looks like a simple VR landscape: lush overgrown gardens in front of an ancient Scottish manor. Fifty metres ahead, the manor's wooden gates are invitingly open.

The purpose? Trivial. Get to the gates ASAP.

The problem is, it's a hyper-maze. The garden is mined with invisible hyper-links. To test how it works, Don and Molly innocently walk straight ahead. Five seconds later they disappear. Disintegrated, it seems. The dog is barking in dismay. The others look around.

"We're here!" Molly shouts from the rear end of the garden, close to a small stone well where a pierced wooden bucket is hanging from a rope.

"Oh, look who is there!" Paul points to the manor's gateway. Mat's cat happens to be sitting on the front steps, casually cleaning his paws.

The dog runs ahead full speed, barking like the trumpets of Jericho. Near-instantly he finds himself fifty metres away on the left, keeps running, reappears far away on the right, then at the back, and so on from spot to spot while the Siamese keeps licking his paws, aristocratically unconcerned.

"I'd better take Sam to my cabin. I'll be back soon," Pen says, and she switches the dog and herself out of this reality.

After they've gone, Bobby construes, "Has she ever considered having a real dog? A smaller one, I mean."

"Real pets are forbidden at the academy," John answers, Point-searching the computer. Plunket castle is on beginner's mode, meaning the computer is making it easy for them. The hypermaze's superastral model is elemen-

tary. All they have to do is Point-tune into it and they will sense which direction to follow.

The woman in the stars. She was Hiram's lover.

"I've got it!" Anna announces. Point-tuning into the computer, she has found the hypermaze's superastral model – the blueprint of the garden with the map of all hyperlinks. It is quite similar to the eyeboard of a Scalene fighter, except that there are no visuals. The geometrical shapes are not to be looked at but felt from the Point.

John tunes into Anna's Point, finds his way to the superastral model. "I see!" he exclaims admiringly. They both walk three steps backwards, reappear twenty metres ahead, walk three steps to the left, jump another twenty metres to the right, then behind, then forward. Lo! They are standing at the steps of the manor.

The cat walks through the gates and disappears inside.

Anna's eyes flare, "I bet it's a haunted castle!" She follows the cat.

"Tune into us, we're Point-holding the superastral model for you!" John calls his friends who by now are dispersed in the four corners of the gardens.

Bobby tries his best but foul wisps of black smoke are back in his head.

Hiram's corpse.

He calls for the light but everything becomes shrouded. It's sunset in fast-forward mode.

She loved Hiram so much. Beyond time. Beyond oblivion.

Eyes half-closed, he sleepwalks to the left, finds himself way behind amidst a patch of begonias, falls to the ground, can no longer see his friends behind overgrown grass. "No! No!" he screams. "Not again!"

Don has Point-sensed something very wrong. "Emergency break! Bobby is down!" he calls, and they all run to the patch of begonias. A straight run, all hyper-links disconnected. After the maze, it's nearly too easy, like flying.

They find Bobby convulsing, his face in the dirt. Just by looking at him, they are badly hit by something they don't recognise. Their heads are filled with black fumes, their hearts pinched by a glacial chill.

"John Scavenger to Lieutenant Semper. We need you at the shooting ground, Lieutenant," the MC sends a call through a May Day frequency. "Bobby..."

Bobby is far away.

Sinking into the pit. A dive into the abyss.

To the bottom of the pit, where he belongs. A world in black and black.

Alone with billions of other shadows who have long forgotten they used to be human beings. Chained by the beast, suffocating becomes a state of mind.

Darkness eternal, the sky is dead. There has never been a God.

There is no way out.

Hiram *is* dead.

2.29 World to Come, Archive Hall 4 – Teyani's Hall

Master Semper of the Brown Robe gives his verdict, "Let him die now, before it is too late! If we separate his innermost soul and bring it to the Archive Halls *right now*, we can still cleanse it. If we wait any longer, I don't know that we will ever get him back."

Antaria, shining White Eagle light, turns skywards.

Teyani bites her lip and shakes her head, her heart heavy with the wound of the world, "But if Bobby dies now, what will become of Hiram?"

"Teyani, the *last* thing we need is to plant the seed for another Aphelion," Semper replies sternly.

"The woman whose head is high in the stars..." Antaria puts forward, "can't she help him?"

"She is sound asleep," Teyani says.

"Not so of her spirit of remoteness," Antaria points out. "From the Eagle, I say, let the Flying Dragon sing the Song of Creation, and Hiram will rise."

"Well worth trying. Master Szar could establish the link," Teyani foresees. "Will you agree to this, Semper?"

Semper sighs, closes his eyes, reaches Thunder. "Agreed. But unless the link proves fruitful, I want Bobby dead. Fast. Otherwise, Hiram will never return."

Spoken from Thunder, and sanctioned by the Sons of Apollo.

"How long do you give us?"

"Down there, it's immediately or never," Semper answers.

Immediately or never – the Apocalypse in one sentence.

2.30 Family matters

Lying in his VRR bed Bobby opens his eyes. He guesses Szar's presence. Warm and enveloping. Can't really see him behind the haze.

Szar speaks a few kind words. Bobby isn't sure which words, the sounds are muffled. Until he hears 'Panther'.

"What?" he asks.

"I have a VR message for you from the Panther," Szar repeats.

The haze is already half-dispelled, revealing Szar's broad-shouldered silhouette. The Brown Robe man is sitting on the bed. The cat is there too, in the middle, sleeping.

"Can I see the message, please?"

Here she is. Standing in front of him, speaking. To him! The Panther is speaking to him! Her smile has already dispelled the mists, there is magic in the air. Boy, is she beautiful!

"Can I see the message again, please?"

The nectar of her words feeds Bobby's marrow, makes him stronger by the second. He especially likes the last moment, when she briefly laughs and passes her hand through her black hair, which she has tied. She's such a joyful person, really.

"Can I see it again?"

Szar laughs, "Would you like me to loop the message for you?"

Small voice, "Yes."

It's a short message, less than three minutes. The Panther knows how to say a lot in a few words. Each time, Bobby discovers new levels of meaning. Not just in her words – also in her eyes, her smile, the harmony of her face.

A few rounds later, he turns towards Szar, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure!" Szar discontinues the message loop. "The Masters of Thunder *love* questions."

"Is there a military academy on Mothership 7?"

"No. MS7 is one of the battle stations of the Philadelphian Air Force."

"I thought the Panther was an instructor for fighter pilots," Bobby says.

"She is. There are a number of alpha-alpha choirs of knights posted on MS7," Szar explains. "She is in charge of perfecting their training on an accelerated tempo. Since the 3rd battle of Mercury, the fighting hasn't stopped over there, resulting in a shortage of pilots. That's why she has so little time to send you messages, by the way. Otherwise you'd see much more of her, I promise."

Bobby is thinking deeply. "Does this mean if I could raise myself to alpha-alpha standards, I could be transferred to MS7 and be trained by her?"

"By all means, Sir Bobby!"

In a flash, Bobby has found his central motivational thread. A new light in his eyes, he sits up, cross-legged to avoid making the cat cross. He leans against the cabin wall, facing Szar.

Amused, the Master of Thunder gives him a look.

That's when Bobby is hit with the terribly painful realisation that this situation can't go on forever. You simply *can't* be in love with the wife of your best friend's reincarnation without ending up creating an ugly mess. It's just a matter of time. But what to do? Szar *is* his dearest friend. Can't even get away with it by saying he's just a virtual clone. Precisely, the Szar in front of him is *not* just a clone, he is a virtual emanation shining the presence of Szar's Spirit, who constantly holds Bobby, pours warmth into him. Szar's Spirit, presently incarnated in the Philadelphias as Colonel Philip Serah.

Makes Bobby hate himself. Feel sick. "Where does Philip Serah live?" he asks.

"Mothership 7."

Expectedly, it must be the happiest marriage ever. "What kind of man is he?"

Szar doesn't answer. He looks deep into Bobby's eyes, Point-pairing with him. Stopping time.

Unrestricted opening, like Bobby could enter him and read him throughout, from Atlantis to Philadelphia. If he knew how.

"I'm sorry," Bobby contains his tears, "it must be exasperating for you to see me be in awe of the Panther."

Silently, Szar shakes his head.

So much love.

"You know, she and Serah have a daughter," Szar says.

Bobby had forgotten about the brat. So it's a daughter.

"About your age," Szar adds.

So what?

Now wait a minute. The Panther's daughter... about his age?

Mm...

"This daughter..." in Bobby's RR neocortex, there's super-fast thinking thundering, "...is she studying to become a knight too?"

"No. She was caught on Philadelphia 6 when the Rex invaded it. For nearly ten years the Panther and Serah haven't had any news from her."

"That's terrible! Do you think she could be dead?"

Hiram vowed to find her.

"Unlikely. The Rex's tactic is to keep everyone alive. That's how he can inflict maximum damage."

The Panther's daughter in the Rex's clutches! A wave of disgust and outrage rises in Bobby's chest, "Her astral body is being contaminated, just like mine when I was in Hyper-Earth Link?"

Szar looks down to his left fist. "Same for everyone in Philadelphia 6," he says in the voice he uses when there's Dragon business in the air.

Bobby feels an urgent need to know about Philadelphian history. "How did this invasion take place?"

"About ten years ago, Hyper-Earth Link sent a brand-new fleet against the Philadelphias, starting the 3rd battle of Mercury. Fierce fighting. Lasted more than sixth months. Ended with a narrow victory for the Philadelphians. Philadelphia 34 and Philadelphia 55 were entirely destroyed. Philadelphia 6 was captured, giving the troops of the Rex a permanent footing inside Mercury's orbit."

"But I thought the Rex's ships could be disposed of like virtual cockroaches in your *Stop the Plague* HR game?"

"That was during the 1st battle of Mercury, Bobby – 94 years ago. Since then, the Rex's computers have learnt a heck of a lot from past mistakes. They're nowhere as easy to marude as they used to be."

Bobby ponders, eyes fixed on Szar's Point.

Szar's eyes look like he is thousands of light years away.

There's something profound happening.

With all my mind, with all my heart...

So deep, Bobby hasn't got a clue what.

Edge of Highness. Whiteness eternal. Forever love.

"What's her name?" he asks.

"Whose name?" Szar asks.

Bobby stifles a smile. At times, it isn't difficult to see Szar comes from another age. But this innocent touch is part of his charm, Bobby doesn't mind at all. "The Panther's daughter!" he explicates.

"Virginia."

2.31 Life purpose, next episode

The next day, Bobby is already up and running. He has to miss the early session at the shooting ground because Lieutenant Semper comes to give him a healing – blasting Point-ness and warmth from another world.

Supercharged, he sets off to the class on transpersonal motivation. He finds his friends on discomfiture mode. John is slouching in his chair, Anna and Don have big dark rings under their eyes, Molly looks disturbingly green like her make up is liver-secreted. Penny's eyes show she's been weeping all night. And Paul's head is resting on the table, his crossed arms used as pillow. Asleep, it would seem.

"How are you Bobby?" Molly inquires.

"Great! I have things to tell you. But what's going on here?"

"We crashed after Plunket castle," John tells him. "Our Point-scores fell back to what they were two months ago."

"So forget about the promotion to beta-pi! The choir will have to stay beta-omega for at least another three weeks," Don says.

Which goes completely against Bobby's plans.

"Tell us your news, Bobby!" Penny asks.

Bobby takes his chair, turns it around and strides on it. "I found my life purpose. It dawned on me in the middle of the night. *Perfectly* clear! Now I know exactly where I am going."

Bobby looks totally unlike himself. A wave of curiosity revives the room. Paul sits up. John regains his vertical countenance. Anna remembers the White Eagle. Pen swallows high,

"Tell us!"

Bobby takes in a deep breath. "My life purpose..." he declares emphatically, "is to see that Philadelphia 6 is liberated."

Perplexed silence.

Paul tentatively puts, "But I thought your life purpose was to show a VR potato could become a knight of the Apocalypse? That sounded quite noble to me."

"Oh, man, give me a break!" Bobby sighs. "A life purpose centred around being a cripple? Not for me, thank you. How could that ever take off into transpersonal will?"

Perplexed silence reiterated.

Hiram's volcanic will. He was unstoppable. Until.

"I have started studying the maps of Philadelphia 6's surroundings," Bobby goes on. "I've come up with a few ideas already. Nothing easy, the station has been surrounded with the deadliest minefield of all times: made of the so-called 'intelligent P-21' explosive devices, which the Rex first introduced during the 3rd battle of Mercury. But with top-level maruder pilots, there might be a way around this," he raises his right fist, just like the pilots of MS7. "It's the Apocalypse, the time when everything is possible! Which brings me to my next point. I found a great central motivational

thread: I want our choir to become alpha-alpha Saint-Bernard. I know we don't *need* to reach alpha-alpha standards in order to graduate, but that virtually gets me going. It's so much in line with the quest for breaking all limits, which is what the knights are all about."

Glances are exchanged in the audience.

"Well... thank you Mr Bobby Elmian," John says in the formal voice he uses with guest speakers, "this was a most inspiring communication. Does anyone in the choir want to ask questions?"

"Yeah," Anna comes in first, "why the fuck Philadelphia 6? Why not Raven's Nest, or even the satellites of Mars, for instance?"

"The strategic importance of Philadelphia 6 is absolutely crucial!" Bobby elucidates. "As long as the Rex keeps a footing within the orbit of Mercury, the situation of the Philadelphias can only remain precarious. And as you know, a few months ago during the short 4th battle of Mercury, the Rex would *never* have been able to create the blockade, were it not for the infrastructure his troops had established on Philadelphia 6. So, from the moment Philadelphia 6 comes back into our hands, the blockade will collapse, with the obvious economic consequences this entails."

Disconcerted, John scratches his head. "Other questions?"

None.

Doesn't feel like a day to be wasted in chatting. "To the shooting ground?" Bobby suggests.

"Nope! Lieutenant Semper has ordered us to stay away from the shooting ground for two days," John says.

"It's not punitive," Molly adds. "It's for our own protection."

"So what do we do?" Bobby has a life mission to fulfil.

"Go on with the classes and rest," John repeats the orders.

"See ya, brethren!" Bobby VRRs himself back into his cabin. He cannot yet follow the classes with the others, he's got a few years of catching up to do, especially in maths, computing, physics, engineering, history, and neurocybernetics.

Wisely, he begins with the latter. Meeting Varga in the engineering labs, he announces, "Maruding, Colonel. That's what I want to hear about."

Varga grins with satisfaction. "Follow me!" He takes Bobby into a forty-metre-long hall occupied by an antique mainframe computer which makes cute click-a-tee, click-a-tee sounds and has panels with flashing lights, obviously designed for the joy of children below sphincter-control age. Clearly, it's historical background time.

Varga goes baba, "Maruding is the contraction of MAchine intRUDING. It means spying or even influencing the functioning of a computer with the power of consciousness. Where did we last leave our discussions on the astral body?"

"You were explaining how thoughts originate in the astral body, then are reflected into the brain. You called the consciousness of the astral body

'mental consciousness'," Bobby reminds himself. "And you defined the superastral body as the part of the astral body that can operate supermind."

"Now what about computers. Do they have an astral body?"

From what Bobby has understood, animals, people and magards have an astral body; plants, metals, minerals and virtual clones don't. "Being mere pieces of hardware, computers can't have an astral body!" he deducts.

"That's what everyone believed until the 21st century," Varga adds an oriental touch to his grin, visibly inherited from his buddy Harry. "When computers reached a certain degree of complexity, neurocyberneticists started detecting fields of superastral consciousness attached to them."

"Like a superastral body?"

"Exactly. It is one of the fundamental laws of neurocybernetics: all computers generate a superastral image, like a cloud of superastral consciousness. It's called the 'superastral model' of the computer."

"So it's the opposite of RR people," Bobby gets the picture. "With RR people, it's the astral body that moves the brain. With computers, it's the hardware that generates the superastral model."

"Roughly speaking yes. In reality, it's much more complicated. Know the story of the chicken and the egg?"

"Like in Bloodthirsty Giant Chickens?" Bobby remembers one of cousin Sigfr!d's favourite games.

"Never mind," Varga shakes his head and goes on. "The point is, the more sophisticated the computer, the more structured and 'crystallised' its superastral model. Past a certain degree of sophistication, the superastral model becomes so powerful that it *cannot* not interfere with the hardware. Another law of neurocybernetics."

"I see!" First appearance of Harry Lee's grin on Bobby's face. "Screw up the superastral model..."

"By using the power of the Point, for instance," Varga winks.

"...and the computer will start doing naughty things, such as getting five Cartesian carriers to bump into each others."

"Those were the golden days!" Varga lets out a nostalgic sigh. "Now, of course, the computer scientists of Hyper-Earth Link have developed anti-maruding software that renders machines infinitely less influenceable by superastral models, and makes the superastral models so complicated that only hyperlogic virtuosi can crack into them."

"Can a computer be 100% shielded against its own superastral model?"

"Thank God, no! That is mathematically impossible," Varga reassures him. "Now for the practicals..." he affectionately slams a nearby panel of the computer. "Let's have a look at the superastral model of this dinosaur. Know what a dinosaur is, by the way?"

Bobby nods, "My cousin used to farm them."

The computer disappears, replaced by some kind of eyeboard less than half the size of the command system of a Scalene fighter. Unlike an eyeboard, its glowing geometrical shapes are constantly changing and moving.

"This is not exactly the computer's superastral model, but a 3D expansion of it. Imagine all this packed into a point – that's the superastral model."

2.32 Who was Hiram?

Bobby is taken by study fever. Lieutenant Semper has advised him to stay away from the shooting ground for two weeks. So he spends his entire days at the virtual campus, rushing from one lab to the other in the exalted company of Colonel Varga and Colonel Lee, examining the superastral models of anything that moves, from medicomputer-shower-toilet units to the phenomenal Scalene 333, the last born of Shankar Rashi's family and fastest fighter ever.

Flying a Scalene fighter in full awareness of its superastral model is a completely different experience. Bobby can't get enough of it. Your Point geared into the superastral model, piloting turns into magic. Each time you activate a function in the spacecraft, you feel 'something' moving above your head. Information flows within the spacecraft's computers reflect into an exhilarating dance of shapeless forms and packed colours in your Point – lofty, grand, magnificent. The Scalene fighters have not just been designed to have Point-friendly superastral models, they are sheer Point-awakeners, steroids for the superastral body. They make Bobby feel alive. Like never before.

Which inevitably brings an anxiety. When is the next crash?

So far, each time Bobby has reached summits in the Point, a catastrophic fall has followed. Straight from the Golden Sun to the bottom of the abyss.

"Ultimately," Szar tells him, "it's by being able to find a thread to the light when immersed in darkness that your ties to the Rex will be undone."

Finding light in darkness – that sounds as likely as a bonfire at the bottom of the ocean. When the black fumes take over, Bobby completely forgets that light has ever existed. There is only darkness, the darkness in which Ahriman rules, unchallenged. Bobby's individuality ceases to exist, he is swallowed by the ignominious night. Into death eternal.

He *has* to find a way not to crash.

"Ask Lieutenant Semper," Szar suggests. "He's like me, he likes questions."

Let's not wait a minute, it's the Apocalypse. Bobby VR calls Semper on the spot.

After a split second of intense Point-cogitation, Semper decides to change the plan, "Meet me at the shooting ground at 19:25. Both of us in RR."

It's one of those days where Mat's cat seems to be completely off his brain, running to all corners of the room after invisible prey, disappearing through the walls, and even at times falling down through the ceiling onto the bed. When Bobby leaves his RR cabin, the cat playfully runs after him. Manipulating the long distance electrodes in the walls, he forces AR signals into Bobby's brain, superimposing himself onto Bobby's RR. And there he is, bolting along the corridors, running through people and through

Bobby. At least, in AR Bobby can't get scratched. Bobby does his best to look like he isn't noticing anything so as not to appear like a madman to the RR military personnel who are rushing along the hallways. Anyway they're too busy, they probably wouldn't notice anything.

Bobby arrives at the shooting ground early. It's the first time he's come here in RR. As soon as he crosses the threshold, he enters a HR space divided into twelve distinct realities, four of them occupied by fellow choir members, the rest empty. Bobby walks into one of the empty realities, only to find Mat's cat cruising around like a torpedo on a circular course.

It looks like it could be a large empty room, some 6 by 6 metres. The door was real but the walls are probably virtual, it's hard to say without poking your finger. To give it a try, Bobby walks to the left but before he can reach the wall the cat jumps after him and rolls on the floor, madly spinning after his tail, then stops, eyes fixed on Bobby, purring.

Purring? Mat's cat?

Amazed, Bobby bends down, wondering whether to attempt a peace-making gesture. No time to think. The cat leaps up, dashes through him and lo! all the virtual walls disappear, there's only one long hall. Adjacent to Bobby's space there's red-haired Molly, completely naked in the middle of a hyper-drill full of floating white globules and golden little stars.

"Break!" She turns to Bobby, astounded. "What are you doing in my reality?"

"Uh..." Bobby had never noticed she had such big breasts.

Two realities away, Penelope is White-Lining, far too high to notice anything. But her Saint-Bernard puppy starts howling in panic, like Mat's cat has sent him a vision of hell. "Break!" Phased out, she looks around, wondering what the cat is doing here, then discovers Molly and Bobby.

Meanwhile, from the other end of the shooting ground, Paul and John wave, "Hello, Molly!"

"But get out of my reality!" Molly yells, furious, unsuccessfully trying to mindswitch herself out of there.

Pen would find this rather amusing if it weren't for her dog. He's flat on the floor, crawling, yelping in terror.

The cat is sweeping through the hall like a white meteor when, suddenly, all virtual walls are re-established.

Peaceful semi-darkness. An empty hall, 6 by 6.

No cat.

Bobby is left thoughtful. Did Mat *really* program this, or did his creation go wildly out of control? And why this abrupt ending?

Enter Lieutenant Semper, "To the Point, Brother Knight."

That explains the abrupt ending. The cat knows Semper wouldn't take this kind of shit.

Standing straight, Bobby replies in a stiff voice, "To the Point, Brother Knight!"

"The shooting ground's superastral model is slightly off balance," Semper has already detected. "Did I just miss something?"

After hearing a full report, the lieutenant ponders, "It's the Full Moon," drawing a perplexed frown from Bobby.

"Every 16 days, Titan finds itself right in between Saturn and the Sun. It's the closest equivalent we have to a Full Moon on Earth," Semper explains. "In the genetic labs, animals tend to become agitated. Effects of this kind have been observed throughout the solar system. And it affects people too, to a certain extent."

So the cat-program goes out of his mind at the Full Moon!

Showing Mat's sense for detail. If transported to the Earth, the cat would no doubt adjust his rhythms according to astronomical databases.

"Now," Semper moves on, "we have to find a new way for you to perform hyper-drills," he says, looking through Bobby as he does at the start of each healing session, when he Point-scans his pancreas.

Nothing to be jubilant about, judging by Semper's reserved facial expression. Never mind, Dr Fawlers is growing a new pancreas for Bobby, just in case.

"What's your purpose when hyper-drilling?" Semper questions.

"Score as high as possible," Bobby answers, without completely believing it. That's what Sigfr!d would have answered, for sure. But Bobby still has philosophical reservations. He finds it much more satisfying to bring a smile to Penny's face than to try to prove to the world he's the guy with the super-Point and the super-penis.

But then, of course, only a crack maruder could liberate Philadelphia 6.

"From now on," Semper interrupts his thoughts, "the goals will be different. First objective: go *just* high enough for a touch of black fumes to be released into your head, then hold onto Master Barkhan Seer's light in your Point and call for help until you are back to your normal self."

"But Lieutenant! When the smoke comes, there's nothing left of me. I..."

The intensity of Semper's gaze makes Bobby's wave of anxiety fall flat. It is replaced by a superior silence. The room is filled with presence.

So much love in this man's eyes.

"You know Bobby, I too had to face the Prince of Darkness," Semper speaks in a different voice, softer. "A long time ago. My situation was easier than yours, but facing the abyss is never an easy task. One thing saved me: there was one person for whom I cared immensely. A child, named Mairya. Had I died then, young Mairya would have found himself in dire straits – worse than death. So in the deep night I fixed my Point on Barkhan Seer, and my mind on Mairya. And each time I was about to succumb, the thought of him gave me the strength to go on."

Bobby can see there could be some relevance to his own case, here.

Sure, Virginia's plight is worse than death. The question is, does he really believe he could rescue her?

A blasting light in Semper's eyes. "Bobby, if you can overcome the black fumes, then you can do *anything*! *Anything!*"

Said with a punch that takes Bobby's breath away.

When Semper says 'anything', he really means *anything*! It's the truth, you can read it in his eyes, and it's apocalyptic.

Anything!

Surely a man who could do *anything* could find a way to liberate Philadelphia 6.

"Which brings me to your second objective when hyper-drilling," Semper goes on, "find out who Hiram is."

Chain reaction, nuclear fission kind, triggered in Bobby's mind. Before he has time to moan, Semper has already engaged, "White Line!"

Ascending along the thin thread, straight into a space of blazing white light.

"Stay here!" Semper orders.

From Point to Point-ness. From white light to the infinite breath.

Who is Hiram?

The woman with her head in the stars is holding Hiram's shadow in her arms.

Don't bother, he is dead. His remnants scattered in the filth, at the bottom of the abyss. No hope for him. He will never return.

The insidious call: Why not join him there? Lie with him. And let all this be finished.

What's the point of fighting? The world is without love.

"No!" A scream breaking through the night, "Virginia, I don't want you to die!"

"Break!" Semper shouts. Taking both Bobby's hands, plunging his fire into his eyes. "Just like this, Bobby. Just like this."

2.33 Virtual passion

"Is there a program that would allow me to know what someone looks like, knowing her parents?" Bobby calls the VR campus' information centre.

Daniel the cool presenter appears in Bobby's cabin. "Let me think... that would have to be in the genetics department. We need to get you a tutor in genetics, Bobby."

Two men, two women and a decapitated chunk turn up.

The matter is far too serious to be left up to chance. "Colonel Varga," Bobby VR calls, "who d'you recommend as a tutor in genetics?"

"Professor Eleonor Mazbrouk!" the colonel answers without any hesitation.

"You have her! Send my regards to Penelope Heinzel," Daniel takes leave, with an if-you-see-what-I-mean sort of smile.

This clone is such an asshole!

"Thanks, Colonel," Bobby terminates the VR call.

Meanwhile Professor Mazbrouk has appeared in Bobby's cabin. Wearing a white coat, she's a dark-skinned middle aged woman who's not only fat (meaning dating from before the invention of active enzymes) but also wears spectacles (meaning dating from even earlier than that). Her scruffy curly hair looks like it's been dyed not completely the right colour, aiming for black.

Shit! We've inherited an antique.

After the hello-hello, she questions, "So what's your motivation for learning genetics, Bobby?"

Genetics is an elective topic in the knights' curriculum.

"I don't want to learn genetics, I need a program to calculate what a girl looks like according to the appearance of her parents."

"I see." She doesn't seem thrilled by the idea. "Got some cell samples from the parents?"

"No."

Professor Mazbrouk looks up to the ceiling and sighs, like they've given her a spas to tutor. "So what have you got?"

"I have a VR recording from her mother, and I should be able to find a picture of her father in the directory of the knights of the Apocalypse."

"Fff..." she looks up again, less and less enthusiastic. "That ain't gonna take us very far, my boy."

"But..." Bobby isn't going to give up so easily, "there *must* be a way, Professor. Could I call you something shorter than Professor Mazbrouk?"

"Doctor Mazbrouk. Can't you get me cell samples?"

"Perhaps later. Impossible for now. But *please* do something, I *must* find out," he makes it clear it's a matter of life or death.

"Yeah, why?" she bends her head slightly forwards, bypassing her narrow glasses to look him in the eyes.

"My business!"

"Mm..." she bends her head to the side, like it's suddenly becoming more interesting. Closing her eyes, she scans all medical databases on the network. "We would have to find top-level hyperlogical algorithms... The only thing I could think of is..." she reopens her eyes, "...Family Traits. First written on Phobos, 95 years ago, by a bunch of whackos who were hyped on recreating Adolf Hitler's genome from WW2 cinematographic records. Hha!" she scorns. "The babies which came out of their test tubes turned out to be so idiotic, they concluded the program didn't work. I myself would very much question this conclusion but never mind. Their research was later on picked up by the Phobos Bovine Institute, which..."

"Doctor, please! It's urgent."

"All right, I'll cut the story short. When the Phobos Bovine Institute closed, the geneticists of Philadelphia 12 bought their entire database, for a ridiculously low price. That's how Family Traits came to be rewritten, this time with hyperlogic algorithms. Later on, a team led by Dr Donohoo successfully applied it to the recreation of a number of extinct marine species

(high-protein content algae), and also to mammals, but there only with moderate success apart from rodents and cats."

Bobby frowns, "Mat Donohoo?"

"No, Henry Donohoo. His father. Mat came at the end, solving a number of sticky problems for his Dad, and adding the mark of his genius," she grins.

Bobby has reservations, "Is Family Traits a safe program?"

"Safe?" She shrugs, "Family Traits ain't gonna give you more than a library of genomes and their corresponding virtual clones. What you do with them is... your own business! Just as you said."

This woman has no idea what she is getting into. If she had seen the cat, she'd probably think twice before unleashing another creation of Mat's.

But in life one must sometimes take risks. "So what do you need, Doctor?"

"Everything!" she scratches her nose. "Family Traits is packed with hyper-synchronicity algorithms. See what this means?"

"No."

Hiram loved cats. Cats loved Hiram.

"Hyper-synchronicity is the branch of hyperlogic that studies the mathematical relationships between seemingly unrelated events. Because Family Traits relies heavily on hyper-synchronicity, every little bit counts. *Any* piece of information about the parents you can supply me with will narrow down the palette of possible genomes."

Bobby starts with downloading the Panther's message into Dr Mazbrouk, then he invokes, "Knight's directory, searching for Colonel Philip Serah."

"What?" the doctor shouts in horror, "You want me to clone the daughter of an air force colonel? You must be joking!"

"But we're not cloning her, we're just trying to see what she looks like!"

"Sorry, darling, but that's totally unethical. I'm an Archive-backed program behind which the brotherhood of the knights engages full responsibility. Involvement of living staff members requires their consent."

Sounds familiar. "Listen," Bobby pleads, "what I want to do falls into the category of recreational realities. As far as I may know, there are no limitations whatsoever on recreational realities, are there?"

"Wasting your time, darling. I *can't*."

"Well then..." Deliberating. "Then I want you to teach me genetics!"

The doctor opens her eyes wide and looks at him over her glasses. "You mean you are willing to learn genetics, only to see this woman?" she exclaims, like he has struck a chord that resonates with her. "Bobby, but this is the most romantic scientific vocation I have seen in a hundred years!"

Bobby isn't completely sure what romantic means but there's real emotion passing between them. A fresh start in their working relationship.

Dr Mazbrouk fills the cabin with 3D representations of cells, nuclei and wafting chromosomes, and there follows a passionate five-hour discussion

of the Laws of Mendel, at the end of which Dr Mazbrouk asks Bobby a series of questions and announces, her voice wet with emotion, "Darling, you passed genetics unit 1! Congratulations!"

"Do you think I'd be able to use Family Traits, now?" Bobby asks.

"Sure. To be honest, I don't think you really need any knowledge of genetics to use Family Traits. It should be a very straightforward program. Just invoke it! Its access code is ADOLF-000. I can't help you but I'll stay here. Scientific curiosity. I've never seen it in action."

"Invoking Family Traits, access code ADOLF-000!" Bobby says.

A very tall, handsome blond man dressed in a black uniform with lots of buttons, shining boots, and a funny cap on his head appears. "Heil Hitler!" he barks, lifting up his right arm.

"Oh, shit!" Dr Mazbrouk is appalled. "How could they have the bad taste to leave the original interface? Let's start with changing the presenter, if you don't mind."

The clone gives a military nod, "Bitte schön, Frau Professor!"

While she is tinkering with the code, Bobby scans the knights' directory, discovering Philip Serah's holographic picture. He is nowhere as tall and muscly as Szar. Black hair, angular cheekbones, high-voltage eyes in which Bobby recognises Szar's warmth – Serah *has* to be a man of heart, since the Panther married him – but also with a wild side, as when Szar goes clench, unclench... with his left fist.

Hiram and Mat used to be friends. When Hiram died, Mat travelled to Tejovati and performed a ritual to the Mother of the Light, engaging the full power of the Sons of Apollo.

Bobby has already superimposed Serah's face onto the Panther's in his mind, bringing up the elusive image of a black-haired Virginia who has all the things he loves in the Panther and all the things he loves in Szar. For one second it makes him feel immensely vast, clusters of stars revolving around his Point, and unstoppable, like life *is* worth living after all.

From the Fault of Eternity, the Mother of the Light responded.

But of course a first impression isn't scientific enough to satisfy the burning demand of passion, so Bobby lets the image fade and goes on downloading data into Family Traits.

"Should I also put the dates of major life events?" he asks.

"Of course! I told you, every little bit counts!" Dr Mazbrouk insists.

Flipping through dates. Philip Serah joined Philadelphia 12's academy at age 13, trained in alpha-alpha choir Molten Star, graduated at age 17 with a maruding score of... 893! (Oh, shit!) The same year, he married Elyani Alvarez and became the father of Virginia. At age 22, during the 3rd battle of Mercury, he became a lieutenant after taking part in an operation in which three Aristotle-class carriers were destroyed, and six members of the Molten Star choir were killed. Decorated with blah-blah-blah...

Bobby stops for a sec, wondering how he would feel if Penny and five other members of Saint-Bernard choir were killed in battle.

Devastating thought.

"Ready!" Dr Mazbrouk announces. "I've reconfigured the interface. It was more technical than I thought, but now, anyone who has completed genetics unit 1 should be able to use it."

"Thanks, Doctor! We don't want to include things like Philip Serah's musical compositions, do we?"

"Of course we do! Bobby this program is based on hyper-synchronicity, the science of relating things which, apparently, are completely unrelated."

Like Virginia and Bobby.

Bobby decides he likes hyper-synchronicity, makes a mental note to include it in his curriculum, and continues his searches. Bizarrely, the knights' directory lists Serah as a musician before stating his grade of air force colonel. At age 25 he completed a PhD of neurocybernetics entitled, *HR Remastering of Franz Liszt's Works for Piano*. Other works of his include the *Great Ant's Symphonies 1 to 5*, *Valley of the Necromancer*, *Montserrat* and *Fault of Eternity*.

"Okay, let's try!" Bobby decides, turning to the new presenter. She looks very much like she could be the former guy's big sister: same size, same shoulders, but long plaited hair, hu-u-uge breasts, medieval costume with armoured bits here and there and a ridiculous helmet with a cow's horn on each side.

"What's this jerk?"

"Brünnhilde, the other presenter which the whackos of Phobos had designed. I had to keep her. There's too much hyperlogic in this program, modifying her could result in unforseen consequences," Dr Mazbrouk explains. "At least now she won't say Heil Hitler."

"All right. Brünnhilde I want you to establish a phenotypic computer model of Virginia Serah based on reconstituted genomes from her parents," Bobby shrewdly uses the words he learnt in genetics unit 1.

"Jawohl, Herr Bobby! From the data you have given me," she says with a strrong akssent, "I have 187,637,381,023 main phenotypes. Which one would you like to view?"

"What? 187 billion Virginias?" Excruciating pain in Bobby's chest, much worse than the abyss. Oh, cruel destiny!

"I warned you," Dr Mazbrouk takes on a soft, compassionate voice. "Without cell samples from the parents, won't be no piece of cake. But let's not despair. Great scientific endeavours often begin with an impasse."

"I've got to accumulate much more data, is that it?" Bobby realises.

Dr Mazbrouk crosses her arms and turns in another direction, like she's not helping, then looks at him from the corner of her glasses and gives a quick nod.

"Let's do it!" Bobby raises his right fist in the pure tradition of Philadelphian pilots. He calls the VR Campus, "Daniel, I want a listing of all publications by Colonel Philip Serah!" A wall panel appears with a list of communications made in the *Philadelphian Air Force Virtual Journal*, starting

with *Maruding Considerations Relating to the so-called 'Intelligent' P-21 Explosive Devices.*

Aha! So Philip Serah and Bobby have some common interests. Apart from the Panther.

While browsing the list, Bobby calls, "Daniel, I'm planning an essay on the psychological profile of the Philadelphian pilots of the 3rd battle of Mercury. Please download all relevant information, including all social events involving pilots, twelve years before and after the war."

"Downloaded!" Daniel says.

Meanwhile, Bobby throws the entire knights' directory into Family Traits, then launches a cross search in the *Directory of Directories* for any scrap of info on Elyani and Philip Serah.

"Am I forgetting something?" Bobby asks Dr Mazbrouk.

Still looking in another direction, she gives another nod.

"Of course!" Bobby flashes. "The rest of the family!" He engages a search that brings a mass of visual and medical information about 173 family ancestors identified from the directory.

"Can you suggest anything else, Brünnhilde?"

Dr Mazbrouk looks up and sighs in relief. *At last* Bobby thinks of using Family Traits' help system which she has just reprogrammed, keeping him in mind.

"Affirmative Herr Bobby!" Brünnhilde rrepliez. "If you could find Virginia's medical records, it would simplify everything immensely."

"Access denied!" The central medical database refuses to give them the data because Virginia is presumed to be still alive.

"D'you have any idea how I could crack this database?"

"Preposterous!" Dr Mazbrouk dismisses the idea. "TS5's computer network has one of the tightest security systems *of the entire solar system.* You couldn't *find* a worse place to hack!"

"Thank you, Doctor!" Bobby jumps with joy. She's given him the key!

"My pleasure, darling!"

"Daniel!" Bobby VR calls, "I want to write an assignment on the psychological repercussions of the capture of Philadelphia 6 on the rest of the solar system. Please download a list of all stations in which images of Philadelphia 6's medical databases were kept."

"Downloaded!"

Consulting the long list of space stations on a wall panel, Bobby calls again, "Daniel, I want to write an assignment on the 50 stations with the lousiest security systems of the entire solar system. Please send me a list"

"Downloaded! Bobby, I'm impressed. So many assignments!"

Asshole!

"Computer, recoup!"

On a third wall panel, there appears a list of stations with *both* a lousy security system *and* an image of Philadelphia 6's medical database.

"There! There!" Bobby jubilantly points to an easy target which comes second on the list, "Iapetus Retirement Village! Only 20 minutes from here!"

Still not looking, Dr Mazbrouk is clapping her hands.

"Let's go!" Bobby turns himself into a black virtual silhouette. "Computer, establish communication with Iapetus Retirement Village!"

A white-haired clone in his mid-sixties appears, "Welcome to the information centre of the quietest retirement village of the solar system!" Greasy smile. "How may I help you, sir? Or is it madam, perhaps?"

Bobby is already Point-holding the clone's totally primitive superastral model. The retirement village doesn't stand a chance.

"Hands up, man," the black silhouette announces in a threatening voice. "You are being maruded! Do *exactly* what I say and no damage will be done to your program. You fuck with me, I'll erase every single bit of you. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Point-compelled, the clone is already holding his hands up.

It's working! Bobby is feeling excitement like never before in his life. He makes his voice more threatening, wishing Sigfr!d could see him, "Now, I want you to download an image of the entire medical database of Philadelphia 6 into me. Get it?"

"Downloaded, sir!"

"Now, listen, clone! This has never happened. You have never seen me," Bobby says, Point-forcing the receptionist to erase all trace of the transaction from the clone's logbook. "End of communication."

"Yeah!" Back to the cabin, right fist raised.

"Bobby," his genetics tutor feels obliged to tell him, "I hope you realise that if you had tried to download money from them, you wouldn't have gotten away with it like that."

Bobby shrugs, "But I don't need money! I already earn plenty, and I never spend a credit." Now, to the loot! "Computer, search medical database for Virginia Serah!"

A wall panel appears, filled with esoteric information.

"Aaah! Her 374 blood groups!"

Brünnhilde rejoices. "That's *very* good, Herr Bobby."

Bobby turns pale with dismay, "But there is no photo?"

"Privacy rules on the Philadelphias are quite strict." Dr Mazbrouk points out. "Anyway, it could only have been a photo of her ten years ago!"

"Brünnhilde, compute!" Bobby launches the program.

Dr Mazbrouk clears her throat loudly and insistently.

"Stop, Brünnhilde!" Some serious superastral activity going on above Bobby's head. "Of course! Computer, throw the medical records of Elyani and Philip Serah into Brünnhilde. Brünnhilde, compute!"

"And we're not getting too excited, because we ain't got no cariotypes of the parents, remember? Good." Dr Mazbrouk makes sure her student is psychologically prepared. "Brünnhilde! The results?"

"Much, much better Frau Professor. This time I have only 33,354,675 main phenotypes."

The excruciating anguish is back.

Annihilated, Bobby collapses on his bed. "How long to see them all?"

"Watching one model per second, it would take just under 392 days," Brünnhilde answers without any trace of sensitivity.

"Bobby!" Dr Mazbrouk stands by his side, "Let's not succumb to despair. I can see many ways this program could be improved. We don't want to clone Virginia, so we don't need her genome, do we?"

"Of course not! Only the phenotype," he says in a little voice, lying prostrate.

"How about we take a look at one or two models?" Dr Mazbrouk tries to comfort him.

"I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Beyond the Fault of Eternity, Hiram's shadow. Nursed by the Flying Dragons.

2.34 Mathematical revelations

Philip Serah's HR remastering of Franz Liszt is awesome.

At first it's just piano sounds. Bobby finds them rather repetitive, like they're all in the same range and they all sound like piano. He likes *Blue Moon* better.

Then without warning the sounds grab him. He finds himself projected into another reality, face to face with massive forces he cannot see. His Point is set ablaze. Mighty tingling waves rise inside his spine from below. He loses all sense of time and, toll the bells, the sky is on fire, there is a titan dancing in his heart. The world is so much vaster than he had thought! Just as well – the titan needs space, he is unstoppable.

Hiram the unstoppable.

The experience leaves Bobby trembling and panting. Talk about virtual drugs! He immediately wants more, goes straight from there to the second *Great Ant Symphony*.

This one doesn't gel with him. There are too many sounds, and sometimes not enough. It's incomprehensible. Perhaps he should have started at the beginning. So he tries the first *Great Ant Symphony*, but with no more luck. Impenetrable, like an encrypted message without the key. Or perhaps simply nonsensical.

Bobby gives up and goes to meet Colonel Harry Lee who, under Colonel Varga's recommendation, has become his new maths tutor.

Fortunately, the depth of Colonel Lee's patience is positively eastern in magnitude. Each time Bobby's mind goes offline, he slaps his buddha's pouch and grins, "Gotta laugh more, Bobby! Maths is superior fun."

Maths, fun? There must be a missing link.

"D'you think it's because I lack faith?" Bobby asks, remembering what St Francis Asissi said the other day at a transpersonal motivation meeting.

"No, no! Just let yourself become *intoxicated* with the nectar of mathematical beauty!"

Sigh. It's like the *Great Ant Symphonies*, it doesn't make any sense.

Analysing a 3D graph, desperately trying to understand how the fucking x and the fucking y relate to the otherwise beautiful luminous HR shape that fills the fucking Maths lab, Bobby notices there's some superastrality tickling his Point. Not unlike the glorious superastral models Bobby Point-feasts on when piloting Scalene fighters, or when walking to the gates of Plunket castle.

Bobby ignores the feeling. Whatever Harry may say, we're not here to have fun, we're here to understand the function. But as he keeps contemplating the 3D surface, the superastral tickle comes back to the charge and with a vengeance, distracting his concentration.

Or is it trying to tell him something? "You gotta be more receptive to the HR visuals of 3D function graphs," Harry often says. "They've been programmed to seduce you into higher mathematical truths. *Let yourself be enticed by Truth, man of the Law!*"

All of a sudden, a change of standpoint. A luminous flash. Vertical thinking descending through the Point.

"But I understand!"

In his Point, he is holding the superastral model of the function. It's packed in a point, like all superastral models, and it explains everything. It's obvious! The 3D graph is the emanation of the function's superastral model, just like an expanded eyeboard.

"But a mathematical function is not a computer!" he shares his perplexity with Harry. "How can it have a superastral model?"

"With mathematical functions, it's not called a superastral model. It's called an archetype," Harry corrects him, and conjures up a much more complicated 3D surface, "Like it?"

"It's alive!" Bobby is stunned by the limpid freshness and the dynamism of the superastral model he is holding in his Point. Sorry, not the superastral model, the *archetype*! Now he understands why all these 3D surfaces are so beautiful. It's because their *archetypes* are beautiful, not just the surfaces themselves. But more than just beauty, these archetypes have punch – a punch of life.

Hiram's passion for mathematics. No wonder he fell in love with a Flying Dragon.

"See what I mean by intoxicating?" Harry says, while introducing a *t* variable into the equation, starting a dance of the archetype that reflects into a dance of the 3D surface.

But it's obvious. Mathematics is a drug!

"I want more!"

Now, each time Bobby solves an equation, there's luminous verticality flowing down into him, like a precious fluid of awakening.

"That's what supermind is about!" Harry tells him.

"I want more!"

There follows a feverish phase. Bobby completes maths module after maths module, ignoring the shooting ground, missing transpersonal motivation classes, neglecting all other duties and Penelope, hardly finding a minute five times a day to say hello to a few dozen Virginia models. A strange glow in his eyes, his face pale from lack of sleep, he can be seen roaming in the VR maths lab day and night, discovering what feels like real meaning for the first time in his life. Until the morning when, after a seventeen-hour binge of topology, he asks the ultimate question,

"But Harry, who invented mathematical archetypes?"

Harry takes his time to answer. "God."

Still an awfully vague concept in Bobby's universe. God is *not* a directory, nevertheless you can find everything in it and it can point you in the right direction, always, even though you have to find your life direction for yourself, no one can tell it to you, for God's sake!

Harry pursues, "Mathematics is the language which God uses to create the world."

"Is God some kind of directory of mathematical archetypes?" Bobby questions.

Harry tries to be more specific, "God manifests the archetypes. The archetypes manifest the creation. Mathematics tells you how it all happens."

Vertical descent of a revelation, striking Bobby's Point like lightning, "But then, God itself must be an archetype! God is the archetype of *all* archetypes."

Momentous realisation.

"Mathematics is God!"

Hiram often said that.

Projected high in the sky – Revelation Sky, where the archetypes of all mathematical formulae are contained.

Each time there is an archetype, Point-find the archetype's archetype. Going up, faster and faster, along the thread.

The thread of one-ness that knits all levels together and gives life to all archetypes. This is the truth! The life quality in the nectar of mathematical beauty comes straight from God.

So powerful, it could bring Hiram back.

But who is Hiram?

Super-fast ascension, super-fast fall. Before Bobby even has the time to call, "Virginia, I love you!" he has crashed.

Swallowed by the pit.

2.35 Murder

When Bobby wakes up, he and the cat are lying in the VRR bed in his cabin with Szar sitting by their side. Bobby feels a bit grey, but nothing abysmal. He learns with surprise that he has just spent four and a half weeks in hospital, that he has a new pancreas and that he was declared dead three times. He was saved by Lieutenant Semper's healings, Szar tells him,

and also probably by the cat but that's more difficult to assess. The cat kept maruding the hospital, wildly modifying every single prescription made by Dr Fawlers, sending totally unknown substances into Bobby's blood, driving the staff nuts and Dr Fawlers to the edge of a nervous breakdown. Hard to know at the time whether it was system failure or hyperlogic applied to medicine. After speaking to Mat, Semper took the decision not to interfere with the takeover of the hospital by the cat, on the condition that from now on the cat would strictly limit his interventions to Bobby and stay away from surgical theatres. Deal.

Now Bobby is healed, and Dr Fawlers is taking two weeks off in a quiet resort-station around Saturn. And there is some more good news: during his hibernation, Bobby has grown by 5.76 centimetres – a fact which Dr Fawlers found particularly difficult to swallow.

"Thank you, cat!" Bobby extends his hand towards the sleeping Siamese curled artistically with his two front paws up in the air.

Suddenly raising his head, the cat catches Bobby's hand between his two paws, scratching him on both sides, but only superficially. As Bobby doesn't recoil, the cat playfully bites the fleshy mound on the side of the thumb while beating the duvet with his tail.

"Ouch! That hurts!" Bobby protests, "Stop!"

"Try speaking to his superastral model," Szar suggests.

Of course!

Point-tuning in, Bobby discovers an extraordinarily fast moving superastral structure, so vast and complex it makes a Scalene 333 look like a virtual teddy bear. It's unfathomable, astounding. Maruding is not even an option, so Bobby takes a polite Point-approach, "Please cat, stop! It hurts."

No response whatsoever. Bobby tries to ignore the pain. The cat bites even harder, stretching his body, then notices his tail erect in the air and jumps after it like a silly cat, letting go of Bobby for a quick circular race.

Hiram would have loved this cat.

"Wahoo! Far out!" dazzled Bobby exclaims, rubbing his hand. There's hardly any blood. How can such a summit of superastrality be a cat?

When he can recover a normal train of thought he asks, "Can I go back to the maths lab?"

"You can do what you want but you have to do it in moderation," Szar warns him. "Perhaps you don't need to complete 23 maths modules in three weeks as you did before you crashed."

Bobby pulls a face. In his new view of the world, mathematics and moderation don't go together well. Moderation, therefore, is a painful waste of time. "Are you a moderate person yourself?" he questions.

"No, I hate moderation. But Bobby, understand," the Master of Thunder raises his voice, "now there is only *one* thing that matters: freeing yourself from Ahriman's black smoke. Once your astral body is decontaminated, there will be no limits!" In his Dragon's voice, he repeats *"No limits!"*

An echo of Semper's words, *if you can become free from the black smoke, then you can do anything!*

And if anything really means *anything* – which it *did* in Semper's eyes – then it could mean *really* anything. Even liberating Philadelphia 6. Can you imagine? A life spent loving Virginia and exploring mathematics... Brrr!

Late in the afternoon Penny RR-turns up, clad in an all-black dress. She finds Bobby dozing in bed with the cat at his feet. Without asking she walks straight to the gravito-field, slips in, reappears on the mattress. She has a grave look in her eyes. It makes her profound, quite beautiful. She doesn't speak. She just contemplates him, lightly touching his face. Her visual hunger satisfied, she gives him a long, wet kiss on the forehead, tender hands on his chest.

"What news do you bring from Saint-Bernard choir?" Bobby inquires.

"Lots has happened."

"Are we still beta-omega?"

"I'm afraid so. Struggling with lousy scores. But in the last few days something very hopeful has happened. It's a complicated story. Want to hear?"

Of course Bobby wants to hear.

"Until three weeks ago, Don and Molly were having an affair. Which was great. But for some reason it made Paul very angry. Paul became so aggro, he and Don came to blows. But then... surprise! They ended up making love. Now Don is depressed because Molly doesn't want to speak to him any more but Paul is the best he's ever been. He says now his life purpose is to join the Sons of Apollo, and he outscores everyone else in the choir."

"What about Sam?"

Silence. Then, "Bobby," half-choked voice, "do you realise we all thought you were dead? Four weeks ago, Dr Fawlers didn't think you would last more than ten days. And then we heard you were dead. Really dead!"

Bobby listens, empty. His own death is an unexplored concept.

Few knights knew remoteness better than Hiram. With the woman whose head is in the stars, he travelled from beyond the Abyss of the Deep to the edge of the Great Night.

"Four weeks ago, I made a vow to the Mother of the Light," Pen says.

"Who's she?"

"The female side of the Divine. Infinite compassion." Penelope holds her back straight, great dignity in her eyes, "I vowed to her that if you lived, I would stay at TS5 and terminate my dog."

"Have you done it?"

"Not yet," she cries.

He takes her hand, contemplating the blank ceiling. "Do you know something about Philip Serah, who is Szar's reincarnation? When he was twenty-two, six of his choir members died in battle. Do you realise what it must be like? Penny... if the Outer Planets Alliance is going to be at war with the Rex..." kissing her hand. "You know, I would hate to lose you. But the idea you might die in battle is much, much worse. If you leave the academy, at least you will become a beautiful grandmother. I'm sure it will make the Mother of the Light happy."

In the depths of the fault of Eternity, Hiram contemplated her smile.

Penelope is crying, but not yielding, "I made a vow! Now I have to fulfil the vow. I can't go back on it. I was *so* afraid I'd never see you again!"

Now they are in each other's arms. "And what if I was dead?"

"I don't even want to think about that. I love you!" Flood of tears, racking sobs, "I love you!"

In the warm embrace, Bobby can't avoid thinking of the 33 million Virginias waiting for him in Family Traits. Life in RR, he is beginning to realise, is infinitely more complicated than you would think.

"Mother of the Light!" Penelope is crying, "Mother of the Light..."

"Maybe we can find another solution," he whispers to her.

She abruptly extracts herself from his arms, sits up and calls, "Computer! Erase dog program Sam Heinzel, access code PH#303-001!"

"Sam Heinzel belongs to the more-real-than-real category," the computer answers. "Once deleted, it cannot be retrieved. Please enter..."

"Personal security pin SRE-67-VV#999-243," Pen interrupts the message, disclosing in front of Bobby the arch-secret Open Sesame of her money account and of any personal data held for her on TS5's computer network. "Delete confirmed!"

"Dog program erased."

There's a horrified glow in Penny's eyes, like she's holding a long kitchen knife red with the blood of her butchered dog, a seventy-kilo pile of warm meat on the carpet.

Bobby isn't sure why the vow *had* to end in ritual murder. When he and Sigfr!d had vowed allegiance to King Arthur, it wasn't such a big deal.

From the other end of the bed the cat establishes eye contact with Bobby, pulling him into the heights of his superastral model. The cabin disappears, replaced by a sea of mathematical archetypes. Dancing forces sweeping through the non-dimensional continuum. Trillions of combinessent angelic presences as in the core of the Golden Sun. I walk on the edge of two abysses. Mother of the Light, protect her way!

Virginia, Virginia! Wait for me, I am coming!

Is there anything this cat doesn't understand?

Bobby feels a different man, somehow. Maybe it's what dying does to people.

Even when I am far away.

2.36 The specialist

Bobby has received the results of his first essay, entitled *Strategic Considerations Regarding Philadelphia 6, With the Exception of the So-called 'Intelligent' P-21 Explosive Device*. A neat 15 minute presentation which goes through a thorough analysis of the station's structure and communication system, with short interviews of the engineers who designed them. It concludes with a list of twenty-seven reasons why the recapture of Philadelphia 6 should be given top-priority, both by the Philadelphian army and Outer Planets Central Command.

The essay was corrected by RR commander R(ou)x, one of TS5's leading strategists, a specialist in Philadelphian matters. R(ou)x has sent Bobby a VR recording where he presents his corrections. The tall, bald knight with an extravagantly thick moustache finds Bobby's VR-simulated plan of a takeover of the station by commandos interesting but he cannot give him better than a C because leaving aside P-21 mines does not make any sense. "The P-21s are the crux of the matter!" R(ou)x explains, brushing his moustache with his fingers, "No military operation targetting Philadelphia 6 could ever succeed without 1) breaking through the net of P-21s and 2) preventing the P-21s from closing in on the station and turning it into giant fireworks. Planning to invade Philadelphia 6 while ignoring the P-21s is like trying to rob an antique bank without knowing how to crack the safe."

While listening to R(ou)x, Bobby has a far-reaching vision, an archetypal Point-flash: the net of P-21s... *this* is what separates him from Virginia! Besides, he can fully relate to the analogy because three years ago he and Sigfr!d conducted numerous armed robberies, ransacking all the banks in Las Vegas Sinful City.

"Let's not waste a minute, it's the Apocalypse!" Bobby immediately organises a reconnaissance tour aboard a Scalene 245, taking Varga, Lee and Shankar with him. The four friends take position in the flight deck's gravito-armchairs. While Shankar keeps an eye on the automatic piloting, Harry Lee locks the long-range scanners on Philadelphia 6. A one metre-wide holograph showing a wireframe of the station appears. A beautiful sphere with a surface landscape of towers and domes.

"Why don't we see the P-21s?" Bobby asks.

"Only short-range scanners can pick them up. Wait till we get close enough," Lee says.

"So what is it that makes P-21 mines so intelligent?" Bobby questions.

"A long list of frightening features." Varga begins, "They speak to each other, analyse oncoming targets, and calibrate their explosion accordingly. They can unleash the massive power of a P-bomb and restrict it to a strictly circumscribed area. The explosion miraculously stops at the next junction in the net. So, you can't make a hole in the net by starting a chain reaction of explosions. And within minutes, the net repairs itself, sending replacement mines where they are needed. Furthermore, the whole net moves all the time. The problem is, no one has ever been able to detect what governs

the movements, or how the mines talk to each other. Nothing can be picked up. It's as if the damn mines relied on subspace communication!"

Bobby doesn't understand. "Why can't we pick it up?"

"Very simple! Subspace communication hasn't been invented yet, my friend," Shankar gives him a large smile. "Hyper-Earth Link, like us, still has to rely on electromagnetic waves limited by the speed of light."

Another common feature of Sigfr!d's starships which hasn't yet found its way into RR. "Shame. It's so handy."

"Pray that the Rex's scientists don't invent subspace communication before us," Varga warns. "Imagine the nightmare!"

Around Philadelphia 6 the net appears, shaped as a sphere. On one side, the sphere links to a cylindrical space-corridor that goes as far as the blockade. This cylindrical corridor is also delineated by a net of P-21 mines. The Philadelphian pilots have nicknamed it the 'infamous stocking'. Through the infamous stocking, the ships of the Rex can navigate in full impunity from the blockade to Philadelphia 6, care of the P-21s. No Philadelphian weapon can pass through the net, not even the fastest GR-20 torpedoes. It makes the trip from Hyper-Earth Link to Philadelphia 6 a safe, relaxed, leisurely experience. And it makes Philadelphia 6 the furthest outpost of the Rex on that side of the solar system.

"The worst thing about the P-21s is that they are totally unmarudable," Varga comments. "Their superastral model is impenetrable. No one has ever been able to map it."

A thunderous vertical flash of inspiration strikes Bobby's Point. "So is that it? If someone could marude the P-21s, Philadelphia 6 would fall into our hands?"

"A very big if, pal!" Harry Lee nods, dubious.

"We're receiving the call of the sirens!" Shankar warns.

"What's that?"

"The P-21s are trying to take control of our craft. Unless we take some distance, they will make us crash into the net," Varga explains.

"We're being maruded by the minefield?" Bobby asks.

"We don't even know if it's maruding," Shankar replies. "How far shall I withdraw?"

"Don't withdraw!" Bobby takes command. "Let's just see what happens."

Five seconds later, Shankar announces, "Automatic pilot is being overridden. We're on a fast collision course."

Harry Lee raises his hands. "We're dead!" he says with realism.

And it's the truth. Fifteen seconds later, a massive bang terminates the expedition.

Alone in his cabin, Bobby sits up in his gravito-field, thoughtful but determined. He calls the list of communications made by Philip Serah in the *Philadelphian Air Force Virtual Journal*. In Augmented Reality, his bedside wall turns into a panel with the required information. Bobby gets up,

thinking it would be fun to have a RR armchair in his cabin so he could sit elsewhere than in the gravito-field. He invokes the first article, *Maruding Considerations Related to the So-called 'Intelligent' P-21 Explosive Devices.*

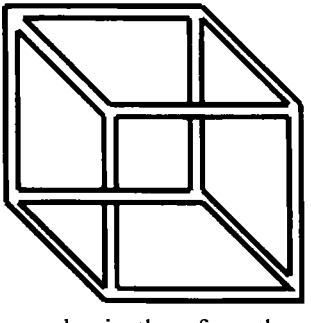
Serah appears, gives a quick TOP and begins, "The purpose of this communication is to share some of the results of the study of P-21 mines carried out at the MS7 Institute of Neurocybernetics. As you can imagine, I won't be revealing classified material. My purpose, here, will be to suggest directions of research which we hope others will follow, cracking the riddles my collaborators and I haven't been able to solve."

While Serah gives some familiar background on Philadelphia 6, Bobby observes him carefully. He looks about the same age as Szar. Bobby checks on the wall panel, the communication was made 4 years ago. Serah was 28. Quite old, since 70% of Philadelphian pilots die before age 27. Yet... he definitely doesn't look like Bobby would call him Papa. Something else will have to be found.

"Now to maruding considerations," Serah goes on. "The superastral model of the P-21 is somewhat of a Necker hyper-hyper-cube, if you see what I mean. All attempts of creating four-dimensional representations have failed, even though the closest we came to a solution was by drawing three-dimensional handles from a hyper-sphere, not unlike a four-dimensional torus."

Bobby stops Serah in pause mode. "Harry! Help! What's all this about?"

Harry AR-appears in the room. He doesn't need to be told more, he reads the communication straight from the computer. "A Necker cube is a 2D image of an impossible 3D cube," he explains, AR-drawing it on wall.



"A Necker hyper-hyper-cube is therefore the 4D representation of an impossible 5D cube," he pursues.

"Uh... can you draw it for me?"

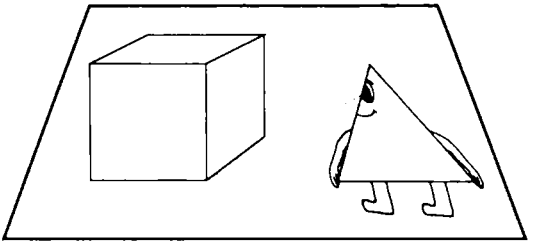
"Sure!" Lee overrides Bobby's reality, making the room disappear.

Bobby finds himself facing a cube. "I don't get it. What is this exactly?"

"What you're not getting is that you are presently in a five-dimensional virtual miniverse."

"Where am I?"

"All right, let's take an analogy." Harry goes baba, "Imagine someone living in Flatland: a flat person who lives in a plane and can only conceptualise flat 2D images. He has *never* seen a 3D solid. You put a cube in front of him. What will he see?" Harry accompanies his question with an illustration:



"Mm... he wouldn't understand what perspective is about, so he would probably only see a line. And if he walked around the cube, he'd see four different lines and would figure out the cube was a square."

"Exactly, buddy! Same malaise for you when shown a hyper-cube," Harry switches Bobby into a 4D virtual miniverse, "you only figure out a 3D cube, because you are lacking a sense of 4D perspective."

Bobby contemplates the cube, wondering how a 4D thing could be figured out of it. "If I want to become a specialist in P-21s I'm going to have to swallow this, right?"

"Not just for the P-21s. These days, if you can't Point-visualise multi-dimensional objects, you can't marude any of the Rex's hardware. Don't expect the Rex's scientists to make it easy for you! Since the 1st battle of Mercury, Hyper-Earth Link has mobilised a phenomenal amount of resources in developing computers with more and more complex superastral models."

The prospect of visualising multi-dimensional objects is immensely appealing to Bobby's mathematical sense. "What do I have to do? Stay virtual for a week and turn my cabin into a 4D space?"

"No, start with less-than-3D miniverses. It's the traditional way. Did I hear you say you want to become an expert in P-21s, by the way?"

"I intend to make it the topic of my PhD, Harry."

"Oho! I like early vocations," Harry rubs his hands with excitement. "A PhD in what?"

"I don't know," Bobby shrugs. "It's irrelevant."

Just the kind of answer Hiram would have given.

2.37 Miniverses

Bobby is inside Penelope, wondering if that's what sex is supposed to feel like.

Magnificently complete. A blissful oneness. The ultimate intimacy: he is inside her, and she is inside him. Mind you, how else could it be in a zero-dimensional virtual miniverse?

An odd experience, really. Pointland – a whole world condensed in a point. There's nowhere to move, there's nothing to look at. There's just a point. Because nothing can be smaller than a point, every being in this world is as big as the entire world. Which creates a feeling of absolute safety: when there is nothing outside you, what could there be to fear? And also a great closeness because of course everyone is in everyone. Combined essence. Saint-Bernard choir all in one, like a choir of angels in heaven: Molly, Don, Anna, John, Paul, and... wait a minute, who is the eighth one?

"Isn't there an extra presence in our world?" Paul also notices.

"Uh..." Bobby immediately identifies the uninvited angel, "I'm afraid it's the cat!"

Everyone tunes in with wonderstruck curiosity. It's not everyday you can be inside one of the most fantastic maruding weapons ever. There is their chance to suss out the brain of a solar system champion. But they can't feel much, perhaps due to lack of multi-dimensional awareness. Resonating with him makes their minds go offline. Except Bobby, who's starting to develop a familiarity with the hyper-animal.

There's a vastness of a different kind about this cat, like a breath of infinity. Can't be put into words, but without this infinity Bobby would suffocate. The cat knows that Bobby knows that, which is why he likes Bobby, in his far-beyond way of cool hyper-cat. Bobby can feel.

Melding minds with the cat, Bobby also realises there's much more to a point-world than it would seem at first. Of course, you can't go out very far. But going in... *that* you can do! Bobby intuitively senses a subspace teeming with mathematical archetypes. It's awesome. Like a 0D sea made of the blueprints of all mathematical theories. God's first smile, perhaps?

"All right let's get to the work!" John says.

Their assignment is to emanate Lineland out of Pointland – expand the point-miniverse into a line. Following the plan they concocted together, they unite their Points, combine their energies, and try to push in one direction.

But then it immediately appears that the plan cannot work: there are *no* directions. They don't know where to push!

So obvious that they don't even bother discussing it.

"All right, let's try plan B!" John decides.

In plan B, they are to work in couples and spark a duality in the point-continuum. Paul pairs with Anna. Bobby pairs with Pen. Don pairs with Molly who, quite professionally, always leaves personal matters aside and fully cooperates with Don whenever a mission requires it. And John supervises the situation.

"This story that boys are supposed to be yang and girls are supposed to be yin is such a whole lot of crap! It's never going to work," Paul scorns.

"Let's swap roles!" Anna offers. "I'll be the yang side, you go full yin."

"Agreed!" the MC validates.

Implementing the plan, the yang elements try to make themselves hard, solid, shining, while the opposite members make themselves soft, yin and watery. And John holds the group-Point, invoking that which is beyond polarities.

There's an interesting wave going through Pointland, like everyone's oneness has become bi-coloured and they're all in love with each other, which in a point-world is nothing different from being in love with yourself and loving humanity at large. The cat really likes it, they can all feel.

But it doesn't seem to produce anything that could lead to Lineland. So, after a while John has to interrupt the celestial delight, "Plan C!"

This one rests on raw power. From the Point, they are to concentrate as much energy as they possibly can. It results in a fierce build up of pressure, like it's a hot day in Pointland. The more they intensify their effort, the hotter it gets, and the heavier.

"Push!" John shouts to encourage them. "Push!"

Even though there is nowhere to push, it definitely *feels* like pushing. Like a chicken who's become too big for its shell. There's a sweaty, swollen feeling in the air. An inflation of presence. Point-ness concentrated to the point of saturation.

"Go on, we're nearly there!" John exhorts them.

After a few minutes Pointland feels like the inside of a furnace. The more intense it gets, the more exhausting it becomes. So much so that they have to give up.

"This plan is going to nuke us!" Don collapses. "We'll never be able to cope with the Point-intensity."

"We need more power," Molly disagrees. "Much more power!"

"But there hasn't been *any* sign showing the miniverse was responding," Anna remarks. "We're fucking stuck."

"No, no!" The MC is in charge of the troop's morale. "Let's start again!"

"Wait, can the cat and I attempt something else?" Bobby suggests.

"What?"

"We've been trying the wrong way. Instead of pushing, how about involuting?" As he speaks he lets his consciousness move in and contemplates the sub-point level where all mathematical archetypes are contained.

In the oneness, he has knowingness of the cat's approval for his strategy.

The others aren't sure. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Travel inwards!"

"How can you go inwards when you are in a point?" John questions.

In the 0D sea of archetypes, Bobby immediately locates the blueprint of a line. "Like this!" he says, Point-involuting into the blueprint.

The virtual miniverse has turned into a line.

Abruptly, the oneness disappears. They still feel like points, but no longer inside each other.

"I can move!" Penelope exclaims. She bumps into Bobby, unsuccessfully trying to reproduce the blessed oneness they enjoyed a second earlier.

"Now there's a front and there's a back!" Don rubs against Molly's back.

"We made it!" John says in a forcibly calm voice, just to remind everyone of the you-react-you-die business. It's action time.

From there their instructions are to expand into Flatland, a 2D miniverse. But first they have to readjust. Going from point to line proves much more of a shock than they had expected. They must establish new references, learn to move again, and let go of the beautiful feeling which united them in Pointland. Now they're still brethren, but it's not the same. Compared to Pointland, however, there's like an implicit coldness between them.

"Uh... there is something not right here!" Paul sends an alarm signal. "The cat was behind me, and now he's in front of me! Yet I didn't feel him pass through me. Now it's behind me again! No, in front... behind... or is it both sides? Oh, I don't like this!"

Bobby doesn't find Lineland particularly interesting. "Requesting permission to move to the next step of our mission, sir!" he addresses John.

John takes a commander's voice, "What's your plan, Lieutenant?"

"The same, sir!" Without waiting he involutes his consciousness into the sea of archetypes, triggering an explosion of the limits of their miniverse.

The ease with which it happens brings a flash of realisation. There is not just beauty in archetypes, there is power.

Immense power!

It puts Bobby in the mood for a titan's dance, echoes of Liszt's HR-remastered music vibrating in his Point.

"Shall we dance, cat?"

With infinity in front of you, how not to be playful?

But before the dance can even begin, the fumes are back.

John immediately notices the insidious flavour of consciousness, "Are you all right, Bobby?"

"I'm getting a headache!" Molly reports.

"Me too!" Paul says. "It's nasty. Very nasty."

Bobby is fighting to stay tuned to Revelation Sky. The sea of archetypes is turning into a sea of pitch. The titans are fading. The music is turning into noise. It's free fall. Into the sewage of creation.

Where Hiram's corpse has been dismembered.

"I'd better get out of here before I make all of you sick," Bobby tells his friends, and he VRs himself back into his cabin. The cat forces VRR on. On the bed he is poised like a sphinx, facing Bobby.

Bobby is struggling. Next stop: oblivion. Calling, "Virginia! Help! Help me!"

The response is immediate.

With all my mind, with all my heart....

Screaming, "But what is it? What are you? Do you virtually exist?"

An elusive presence.

Holding Hiram's shadow in her arms. She loved him. So much!

Fighting, pushing the fumes away. Calling, *Teyani!*

Teyani, is this her?

Beyond Revelation Sky. Vastness. A different kind of vastness.

The fumes are receding.

The cat closes his eyes, turns on his side and rounds himself into a furry mass.

In Archive Hall Four, Teyani is singing a hymn to the Flying Dragons.

Hiram left his keys at No Limits.

2.38 The gold coin

Every morning, the first thing Bobby does is to invoke Family Traits and ask, "Brünnhilde, send me 24 randomly selected 16-year-old computer models."

Family Traits runs its internal roulette and out of 33.3 million, 24 Virginias appear. Normally, Bobby just picks out the Virginia he likes best and spends a moment talking to her, practising saying I love you. This morning, however, there's something odd. One of the computer models has unexpectedly dark skin.

"Brünnhilde, how can you possibly have computed a black Virginia?"

"It's because Elyani Serah's great-great-great-grandmother was black, Herr Bobby. 0.6431% of Virginias fall into the black African ethnic group."

Bobby finds this quite exciting. He wipes out the 23 other ones and adds the last touch, "Computer, diminish model size by 15 cm." Then, "Hi, Virginia! How are you?"

"Hi how are you?"

"Brünnhilde, but why do they all look so stupid?" he complains.

"Dr Donohoo vas only intressted in marine algae, rodents and kats, Herr Bobby. I don't haf anything to compute zychological models of human peings," she explains.

"Can't we add a module that knows how to do it?"

"Herr Bobby, that vould require a kolossal amount of prokramming."

"And so what? Plug into the network, find a clone that can help," he orders and disconnects Brünnhilde from his reality.

"Hi how are you?" black Virginia gives him another idiotic smile.

The 33.3 million of them all have the same smile, it's appalling. Bobby sighs in despair and switches her vocal function off line. What's the point of all these computer models if you can't even talk to them?

Szar's voice makes itself heard, "Szar requesting access!"

Now that Bobby is becoming RR-conversant, he keeps the light over his RR cabin door orange so people request access before coming in.

Promptly getting rid of Virginia, he answers, "Come in! Praise the Great Apollo, Master Szar of the Brown Robe!"

"Praise the Great Apollo, Master Bobby of the Apocalypse!"

Warmth, like the World to Come is shining in the cabin.

Lately Bobby has kept away from Szar, because he'd be so terribly embarrassed if Szar were to ask, why exactly does he spend his days studying P-21 mines and preparing plans to invade Philadelphia 6. But now that Szar is in front of him, he realises how much he has missed him.

"I was just about to go and explore a 4D hyperdrill. Would you like to come with me?" Bobby offers.

"Precisely, it's why I came. Colonel Lee told me of your efforts to overcome 3D mental limitations. I can probably give you a hand with this."

Fly with Szar. Bridge to eternity. Come to me!

"Herr Bobby!" Brünnhilde reappears, this time accompanied by Dr Mazbrouk. "Ve have proplems!"

Dr Mazbrouk waves at Szar with a buoyant smile. He winks at her, like there's no need for presentations. Turning to Bobby the Dr warns, "Darling, what you are asking would require an awful lot of code rewriting, and hyperlogic algorithms never designed before. I'm afraid this is beyond the scope of our virtual programmers. We'd need a top-level mathematician. The question is, how would we entice a mathematician into this project?"

Szar is looking sideways, like he doesn't want to be nosy. But it's not hard to see he knows exactly what's going on.

"Uh... could we discuss this another time, perhaps?" Bobby asks, and with a few polite words he gets rid of the geneticist clones. "Let's go!" he quickly tells Szar, replacing his cabin with a four-dimensional VR miniverse.

To Bobby, the 4D space looks like a normal room, he can't see anything special about it. Four blank walls. The room is empty, apart from a 40 cm long wooden box on the floor. His instructions are to get a coin that's inside the box *without* opening the box.

He lifts the box and shakes it. Rattling sound, attesting to the presence of the coin inside the box. But then what?

"Got any suggestions?" he asks Szar, putting the box back on the floor.

"Sure. Just do it!" Szar bends down and extends his hand towards the box. But when his hand is 20 cm from the box, it gradually disappears, as if it was being dematerialised millimetre after millimetre. Szar keeps thrusting his arm into nothingness till it has disappeared up to the elbow, then turns to Bobby and opens his eyes wide, feigning complete stupefaction.

Bobby laughs, "What have you done with your forearm?"

It looks exactly as if Szar had been amputated. A clear cut at the elbow.

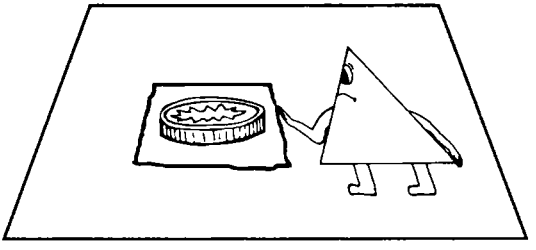
"Mm..." Szar makes his smile mysterious, gradually pulling his hand back from nothingness. The forearm reappears, the wide sleeve of his brown gown, then the wrist... then his hand, carrying a large gold coin.

To Bobby the most puzzling thing was, Szar's hand did *not* pass through the cover of the box. When it disappeared, it was 20 cm away from it.

"But how does it work?"

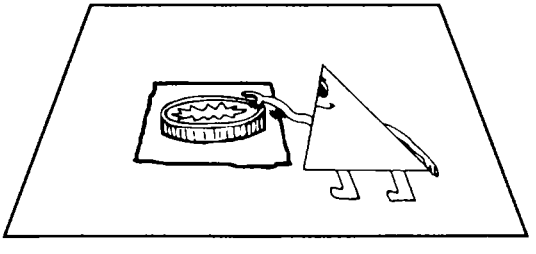
To explain, Szar places the coin on the floor and VR-draws a square line around it. "Suppose you are a 2D creature living in Flatland," he says, rub-

bing his fingers on the floor, outside the square. You are a triangle who lives in Flatland. You know how to move forwards and backwards, right and left, but not up and down. In Flatland, up and down are totally unknown. You've never looked up or down, never even thought of the possibility – the third dimension isn't part of your world. What could you do to reach the coin without breaking the line that delineates the square?"



"I couldn't!" Bobby states the obvious.

"Correct! Without breaking the line, a 2D creature can't get into the square. The only way in is to use the third dimension: raise your hand above the line, move down into the inside of the square, then up again above the line, and down back onto Flatland, thereby violating Flatland's laws of physics."



Bobby is starting to get it, "And while my hand would be up in the air, other Flatland inhabitants couldn't see it. They would think it has disappeared!"

Szar grabs the coin. "Using the third dimension, I take the coin out of a closed square without breaking the line. Using the fourth dimension, I take a coin out of a box without opening the lid!"

Simple enough in theory.

To demonstrate his argument, Szar puts the coin back into the box. Again his hand gradually disappears, then his forearm. After which his forearm reappears, followed by the hand.

The hand is empty. The coin is back in the box.

"But why can't I see this fourth dimension?" Bobby complains. "Harry Lee says it has to do with conditioning. Ever since I was born, I lived in virtual spaces that were replicas of the 3D RR space..."

"Which is why you must use your Point. Ordinary mental consciousness is conditioned to think in 3D. The Point is beyond ordinary mental consciousness. See from the Point. Act from the Point."

Bobby closes his eyes and tunes into the centre of energy above his head. "I don't see anything from the Point."

"Tune into the program's superastral model," Szar instructs.

That's easy. A living world of forms, dancing in Bobby's Point. Everything the program can do comes as a consequence of what's contained in the superastral model.

"Do you *see* the superastral model?" Szar asks.

"Mm... kind of," Bobby looks for words. "There are no visuals as such. It's more... a knowing."

"Tell me: this model, how large is it?" Szar asks.

"Can't really tell."

"Try a rough estimate. More like 1 metre, or 100 metres?"

Bobby is at a loss to answer. And yet the forms that make up the model are perfectly clear.

"Now that's a key," Szar tells him. "You can't tell how large the model is. That's because Point-realms are non-dimensional. In the Point there is no such thing as length, width and height."

"Zero-dimensional?" Bobby asks.

"No. A point is zero-dimensional. But the Point isn't a point, it's a state of consciousness. The Point is non-dimensional – beyond dimensions."

"But it's obvious!" In a flash of understanding, Bobby realises that in a superastral model, there are no such things as spheres, cones or cubes. Only sphere-ness, cone-ness and cube-ness. Their dance isn't a dance, it's a dance-ness.

"The ancient Greeks had a powerful concept: forms, as opposed to shapes," Szar goes on. "Shapes are dimensional, forms aren't. A sphere is a shape. It has length, width and height."

"And superastral models are made of forms, not shapes! A sphere is a shape. Sphere-ness is the corresponding form, is that it?"

"Right and righteous, man of the Law!"

Bobby is moved. The mathematical perfection of the forms in the program's superastral model does something to his aesthetic sense. There's real beauty in forms. And power. Incredible power.

The form is the archetype. The shape is its manifestation.

Shapes come out of forms like trees out of seeds.

An awesome vision. The entire Universe is derived from forms, which are archetypes in Revelation Sky.

Szar lets Bobby go through his mystical revelation for a while, then calls him back to virtuality, "Now, to the fourth dimension!"

"Er..." Wave of hesitation.

"You react, you die!" Szar tells him off. "Hold onto my Point."

"Yes, sir!" Bobby holds onto Szar's massive Point-presence.

"Tune into the program's superastral model, from your Point."

Luminous dancing forms, beyond height, width and breadth. The program's condensed instruction notice.

"I see! I see!" Bobby remains cool. There's complete knowing of how to access the fourth dimension.

Bobby opens his eyes. He thrusts his hand forward and lo! his fingers disappear. Bobby stops and chuckles in contained excitement, exchanging a glance with his friend in Thunder. Then, guided by the knowingness of his Point, he continues the movement. His hand disappears, millimetre by millimetre. Then his forearm.

Flash in his eyes.

In one go Bobby pulls out his hand. Now he's back to normal, all in one piece again. And there's the gold coin in his hand!

Bobby remains very calm, "Can I react, now?"

"No. See what I told you. You just... do it!" Szar grins.

"It's amazing! Do things like this also work in RR?" Bobby asks.

"Not impossible but much, much more difficult," Szar replies.

"Why?"

"Because instead of holding the superastral model of a VR program, you have to hold the superastral model of the entire Universe."

Logical. And highly expectable: RR is always such a pain in the ass. Even though, thinking about it, the superastral model of the entire RR Universe could be quite a cool archetype to Point-probe. For the first time, Bobby can see something really tempting about RR.

Anyhow, "Mind if I change the topic?" Bobby risks.

"Not at all, Sir Bobby."

"Now, this is terribly embarrassing, but I have to ask you. What if... You don't have to answer this, but I have to ask you anyway. I mean, what if I was to develop, say, an interest. Just an interest. Not in the Panther of course, but in her, er.. daughter. That's... your reincarnation's wife's daughter, I mean, you know..."

"Virginia. Yes, I know." His smile is so much like the Panther's. It's as if she was with them.

Thinking of you, now. Sending her love.

"Do you think... I mean, would it stand in the way of our friendship? Because the last thing I would want is to let something stand in the way of our friendship."

Flavour of eternity in Szar's smile. Virtual emanations are profound and mysterious. "Follow your heart, Bobby!"

"So you are still speaking to me?"

"I am with you, Bobby. You have no idea how much."

The woman with her head in the stars is dancing.

2.39 The showdown

The Panther hasn't been able to send any VR messages for a while. Her alpha-alpha units are engaged in round-the-clock actions against the Z

fighters of the Rex. The blockade of the Philadelphias is becoming tighter and tighter.

Bobby is sleeping less and less. Two or three hours per night seem to be more than enough. At first he thinks it's insomnia but he doesn't feel tired. Lieutenant Semper tells him not to worry about it. The good side is, Bobby has more time to study mathematics. But Harry won't allow him more than 14 hours of maths and computing per day (17 hours on Sundays, when Bobby doesn't have anything else to do). And on Lieutenant Semper's order, Bobby is no longer allowed to know his scores at the shooting ground. Whenever he goes beyond a certain intensity, the computer interrupts the hyperdrill. All for the sake of moderation, so Bobby doesn't kill himself.

Moderation sucks. Every day, Bobby hates the concept a little more. If the Rex's black smoke is to kill him, then let it be right now. Why let a cripple's existence drag on? Better die! Between Virginia and him, there is such a long way to cover. At the present speed, he will *never* make it to Philadelphia 6. Which fills his head with suicidal ideas.

Suicide by mathematics. At least that would have some meaning and archetypal beauty.

"Patience!" Semper keeps repeating. "*He that overcomes shall inherit all things.* Overcome the black smoke and you can do anything, you can be anything!" The lieutenant is immensely supportive. He visits Bobby daily, never talks much but gives him healings, practises with him at the shooting ground. He has programmed HR algorithms specially designed to bring up moderate amounts of the arch-ominous black smoke, so Bobby can fight it instead of being swallowed all in one go and end up in a coma.

Bobby would prefer a coma, by far. The dark fumes are foul, they give him ugly headaches, make him depressed. They cloud his superastral clarity, separate him from his beloved mathematical archetypes. And they pollute the minds of his RR friends. His company makes them feel heavy, and lousy. When they Point-pair with him they get poor maruding scores, dark moods, headaches. In some meetings the dark clouds take over, everyone starts quarrelling, yelling at each other like never before. It's a mess.

Bobby withdraws, preferring virtual company. The cat's superastral vastness brings him some fresh air. Colonel Lee initiates him into more and more profound mathematical mysteries, and how they can be applied to tame computers. Programming turns into sheer witchcraft. Dr Mazbrouk is becoming a great friend too, never tiring of chatting with Bobby about Virginia, Virginia's DNA, Virginia's RNA, Virginia's immune system, Virginia's enzymatic apparatus, Virginia's physiology at large, and the nitty gritty of how Virginia's ancestors gave Virginia her present shape. At the end of each series of eight 3-hour chats she asks Bobby 42 questions about Virginia, following which she announces that Bobby has passed yet another unit of genetics.

Szar is ever present, never tiring of answering Bobby's questions, telling Point-boggling stories about Atlantis, the Masters of Thunder, winged an-

gels of Highness and strange beasts of the Underworlds. (Yet another reality! It makes the dinosaurs of Sigfr!d's *Jurassic Farm* look like real pussycats.) One story leaves Bobby breathless: Szar's encounter with the Rex's emissary. How Szar ended up on his knees, gunked with black filth, annihilated. And how, saved by the White Eagle's grace, he rose again.

If Szar has overcome, then why couldn't Bobby? (Says Szar.)

A few major differences, though. Szar's encounter with evil lasted less than 24 hours, virtual time. And when the meeting took place Szar was a Great Warrior, a Brown Robe initiate. The Rex grabbed Bobby in the fucking test-tube he was born in, and has never let go of him ever since.

Which is why the White Eagle will give Bobby one hundred times more help, more strength, and more love than he gave to Szar. (Says Szar, and he seems to believe it.) It's the Apocalypse, the time when everything is...

Perhaps. Meanwhile the headaches are getting worse. Nauseating, with a constant taste of sewage at the back of his mouth. And now Penny is getting chronic headaches too. She has difficulty concentrating, she underscores the others by 46 points, she's the one who keeps Saint-Bernard down in the beta-omega zone.

Her reward for sticking to Bobby in the midst of adversity.

Bobby calls on Semper to help Penelope. The lieutenant says there's nothing he can do. Bobby tries to avoid her, leaves the red light over his RR door. She forces her way in. He gets angry at her, tells her he will never be in love with her. She keeps coming to him and they make love, which makes his headaches better but hers worse. Her health is going down.

She's about to fall seriously ill, Bobby can feel. She doesn't have his tolerance for the Rex's black muck. This shit is going to destroy her.

But for the Almighty's sake, isn't there someone or something that can help her? Crying, desperate, Bobby calls onto the White Eagle.

No response.

Hiram's shadow is heavy on his shoulders.

The day after, Penny learns that her mother is dying. She has to leave the academy for a few days.

To avoid the worsening pain in his head, Bobby takes three weeks off into pure VR. He takes Harry and Szar with him for a neurocybernetic exploration of 4D miniverses of various kinds, not just hyperspheres. An eventful journey during which they fall under the spell of a Nephilim Necromancer who kills Szar and imprisons Harry and Bobby. Escaping the dungeon through the 4th dimension proves no big deal, especially with the help of Mat's cat. But they are recaptured and locked up again, this time in 4D hyperchest, out of which they have to find a 5th dimension way out. They end up on the other side of the Fault of Eternity (a quantum singularity in a remote galaxy), where they meet Szar again, in the company of friends of his called the Flying Dragons. The Flying Dragons show the cat all sorts of strange things about the curvature of time and how it can be

used to make stars young again. Together, they watch the birth of a parallel universe.

Bobby comes back from his holiday very much rested, his Point teeming with new inspiration to tackle the xD superastral model of the P-21 space mine. And he finds a red-cheeked smiling Penelope. Somehow her mother's death seems to have done her a lot of good.

Bobby throws himself into a study of the P-21. Under the watchful eyes of Mat's cat, he downloads every single piece of information the network can supply. There's a heck of a lot he can't make sense of, so he first has to spend 19 weeks bridging in physics, chemistry, engineering, explosive devices. Shankar, Lee and Varga take care of him. Then as soon as he starts getting the picture with the hardware, he realises the problem lies elsewhere: the mine's superastral model. The guy who designed the P-21's software is a fucking genius, a first category mathacker. Frightening. But kind of exciting too, because Bobby is fancying becoming a mathacker himself. After all, mathacking is nothing but harnessing the power of higher mathematics for the purpose of hacking computer systems. Bobby's higher sense of devotion for mathematics gives him the implicit faith that when his hour of hacking tolls, mathematics will be on his side.

Light-hearted, he attacks the stack of techno-heavy articles on the P-21's software, only to discover that 75% of them are full of nonsense, written by smatterers with little or no understanding of Simon's theory of advanced hypersynchronicity. Bobby finds this deeply disturbing, at first, then extremely encouraging: there's plenty of scope for new discoveries.

Suddenly the wall between Virginia and him is becoming thinner.

Taking on the superastrality of a mathacker, Bobby engages the showdown with the P-21. To begin with, he turns the virtual landscape of his bedroom into a P-21: a 7 metre long cylinder, 4 metres wide, in which he gradually installs all the pieces of equipment he reads from the literature, moving his gravito-field so his head is just in the mine's CPU when he sleeps. Penelope loves it, she finds him really sexy when he's in his bomb. And when he makes love to her he detonates the bomb each time she orgasms. Now *that's* apocalyptic sex. But there's little time for recreational realities. Having the hardware in hand, Bobby starts working on 4D representations of the P-21's superastral model. There he runs into a new problem: there's a whole lot of material the network refuses to give him because it's top-secret.

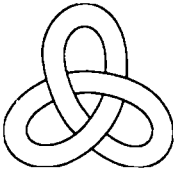
Bobby becomes furious, yells at Daniel, threatens to marude the hell out of the network, insults clone after clone until he reaches RR commander R(ou)x, who listens to him with interest and says he'll get back to him. But when?

"Some time in the near future." End of communication.

But Virginia can't wait! She's in the clutches of the Beast, her astral body getting darker by the day, her breast withering from the sorrow of not having been rescued by Bobby yet. Fuck all these techno-dickheads, Bobby

will start from scratch, with only the indications left by Serah who doesn't like to be called Philip. He tries model after model, fighting to make them fit with the behaviour described in the literature.

Soon he runs up against his limitation to comprehend 4D movements. So he calls on Szar and Barkhan Seer to reinforce his Point and spends entire weeks in 4D VR miniverses, practising untying knots on circular ropes without breaking them, twisting rings into strange shapes.



His sense of 4D perspective is quickly taking shape. Long gone are the days when he only saw 3D chunks when faced with a hypercube. Now he sometimes feels awkward in simple 3D spaces, like there's something missing. And at the full moon, Mat's cat's frantic trajectories make so much more sense with 4D VR switched on.

Bobby gains in confidence, believes his understanding of the P-21 more and more accurate, keeps scanning the literature for scraps of information confirming his theories, sees the need for a more daring 5D model but can't conceptualise it, Point-calls Barkhan Seer for help with all his strength.

Then one evening, a no-warning crash sends him unconscious.

2.40 An inverted volcano with ideas instead of lava

He wakes up in the RR hospital with a fully-shaped 5D vision, a completely new model. There's superastrality gushing down through his Point, like his Point is an inverted volcano with ideas instead of lava.

He gets up, rushes to his P-21 bedroom. Dr Fawlers runs after him in the corridors, yelling at him. Which is how he learns he's been declared clinically dead fourteen times in six weeks – six weeks during which the cat has completely terrorised the hospital staff. Ten days ago the cat messed with the computers so badly the whole hospital went off line for 20 minutes, after which not only Bobby but also another patient, a colonel, miraculously woke up from flat-lined coma, and how dare Bobby run away now, she hasn't even had the time to replace his pancreas.

Bobby tries to explain he's had an urgent idea, he can't explain what, it's a long story, thank you for everything, he'll come back later to pick up the pancreas. And as soon as he reaches his P-21 home sweet home, he starts building a VR model of his 5D superastral vision. Unfortunately, there Harry Lee can't help him much, this thing is beyond what he's been programmed to program. Doesn't matter, by now Bobby is used to working alone.

After four weeks of volcanic creativity, Bobby's cabin has turned into a fully operational virtual P-21 with its superastral model, and the model ap-

pears consistent with the hardware. Explosion of joy and momentous celebration with Penelope, detonating the bomb six times in one evening.

But only two thirds of the problems are solved. Before Bobby can be 100% sure he can marude a P-21, he must reverse-engineer the software that runs it. His programming skills are not up to it, so he first has to swallow 71 modules of computing, 42 of them dealing with the languages used in Hyper-Earth Link. Then, assisted by 36 programmer clones, Bobby endeavours to recreate the code that runs the P-21.

The showdown has resumed. Bobby often thinks of his enemy, the Hyper-Earth Link mathacker who's designed the mine's software. Bobby has an immense admiration for him/her/it, whoever or whatever he/she/it may be. Szar says it's fine, only imbeciles underestimate their enemies. The enemy is a genius, fully fluent in 5D hyper-spaces. The enemy must have worked on the software for *years* to get it to produce such a superb super-astral model. Or perhaps was it the fruit of one second of cosmic inspiration? Perhaps just a silent click inside a gigantic mainframe. A strange kinship develops between Bobby and the enemy. Bobby knows the enemy's 5D baby by heart: he works inside the baby, sleeps inside it, fucks inside it. Fair to say, this baby has sprung from one of the most magnificent mathematical archetypes Bobby has ever contemplated. If that's a fruit of the dark side, then Bobby can see how some mathematicians could be tempted! Perhaps the enemy is a high initiate of the dark side, a servant and personal friend of the Rex's.

Perhaps – oh shit! – the enemy is the Rex himself.

No. The enemy is Hiram's brother.

The programming enterprise turns into a chasm. Bobby hasn't been out of his bomb for four months, and nothing has been achieved. Even using the wildest hyperlogic algorithms, no piece of code can reproduce anything like the P-21's 5D model. Bobby decides he needs to innovate. His programmers are useless, he has to reprogram them. Simon's theory of hyper-synchronicity is not up to the task, he has to improve it. His information on the P-21's computer is insufficient, he has to go fishing for top-secret material in the network.

Daniel detects his first attempts and comes to warn him, "Maruding a medical database from a retirement village is one thing, hacking into military secrets is another. I won't give you away but beware, brother, you might burn your fingers."

Not such an asshole, after all.

Sound advice, but what to do? Asking the techno-dickheads for intel is a complete waste of time. Meanwhile, Virginia is suffering. Bobby knows she isn't well, he can feel her through some kind of mystical subspace link. With all his mind, with all his heart.

He is starting to know her. A little bit better. The problem of course is that there are 33.3 million of them. Family Traits' viewing module can't go faster than one model per second which, without one second of inattention,

amounts to only 3,600 Virginas per hour. Bobby has therefore written a fine piece of software called Multi-V. Multi-V splits Bobby's VR into 9 nine simultaneous channels. On channel 1 he can work on the P-21, while channels 2 to 9 are devoted to Virginia viewings: fashion parades, demonstrations, and so on. It's one of the wonderful things about the Point: multitasking. Multi-V allows Bobby to meet up to 15,000 Virginias per hour (Vph), with an absolute record of 17,823 Vph. Besides, he's plugged a set of modules called *Haute Couture* into the code of Multi-V, so the Virginias don't all have to be dressed in the same way. Channels 2, 3 and 4 are usually reserved for relatively casual wear, while channels 5 to 8 display more refined fashion parades, with the latest collections of Paris-Upon-Uranus designers on channel 9 (again and again).

It's on channel 9 that Bobby meets Virginia #11,867,461. He is on channel 1, concocting a new algorithm, when she appears, wearing a strapless black velvet dress split to the thigh. She immediately catches Bobby's Point-attention. He drops his calculations, transports himself to channel 9, closes all other channels. She has black hair, much like the Panther's. There's oceanic depth in her blue eyes, and something archetypally beautiful about the curves of her lips, her face, her neck, the proportions of her shoulders and her hips. And the presence is with her – this presence which had concretised with time, as Bobby watched thousands of Virginias after thousands of Virginias.

Moved, he slowly walks towards her. "Hi! I'm Bobby."

"Hi how are you?" The same idiotic smile.

Sigh. "What's your name?"

"#11,867,461."

"What an extraordinary name! It's the sum of nine consecutive prime numbers. Oh, I *love* this name! I immediately knew you were special. Welcome to my reality, #11,867,461!" he lightly touches her face.

"Hi how are you?"

Bobby shuts her up and takes her with him back to channel 1. From this day onwards #11,867,461 always stays by his side while he is working, a silent source of inspiration and reminder of the treasure waiting for him on the other side of the Philadelphian blockade. There is something mysterious about her image. It conjures up a strange chemistry in Bobby's RR body. And the presence.

What's in a presence?

Such a difficult question.

And why should Bobby be feeling Virginia's presence? It doesn't virtually make sense. His clones of Virginia aren't virtual emanations like Szar, they're just plain virtual clones. Plain virtual clones don't have presence. And yet, the more Virginias Bobby watches, the clearer Virginia's presence becomes. Or is it just an artefact? After all, the presence is nothing more than a discreet hum in the background of his being. An elusive breath.

Nothing, really. But a nothing that gradually turns into a metaphysical certitude. It keeps Bobby alive.

Now, Bobby is absolutely sure – Virginia *is* the woman whose head is in the stars.

Sometimes he wonders. Is there *really* a Virginia at the other end of this presence? At other times her existence is self evident. She lives in his virtual heartbeat. She pulses through his blood. He can tell when she is sad, or excited. When she feels sexual, he feels like dancing. When she succumbs to despair, he is overwhelmed with dark fumes. It's not intuition, it's ontological symbiosis. With all his mind. With all his heart.

And now he can tell she isn't well. She has been steadily going down in the last few months. Perhaps the ON has stepped up the pressure on the population of Philadelphia 6. Perhaps the virtualisation process is being pushed one degree further. Perhaps she is simply depressed. Alone. Abandoned. Missing the Panther, like Bobby.

So it's time to move, and fast. But Bobby's work is coming to a halt. He *needs* the secret info that's on the network.

So he decides to cross the Rubicon. Holding the hand of #11,867,461 he starts mathacking the network using a new method he's put together when reworking Simon's theories. He knows that if he gets caught, Virginia might die. So he *won't* get caught, trust the mathematical sky – the power of archetypes is stronger than the network's immune system! But the harvest of secret communications on the P-21s causes a major crisis. As usual, more than half of them are full of nonsense, which is both disturbing and encouraging. But three of them contain irrefutable intel showing Bobby got it all wrong. He's been working with incorrect assumptions on the hardware.

His 5D superastral model is false.

Tears of despair, tears of shame, like he has betrayed her. "Virginia, forgive me! Forgive me!" Twisting his hands, "How could I be such a fucking idiot? I should have maruded these dickheads long ago." All this time wasted, and Virginia wasting away.

He starts again from scratch, rebuilds his bedroom, changes his model. But now he has to take constant precautions. He holds stacks of illegally acquired 'level 6' arch-classified information.

More than enough to be court-martialled.

2.41 Mathacker's instincts. Tremble, enemy!

Again it's the reverse-engineering of the software that proves a nightmare. Bobby mathacks the TS5 network over and over again, searching for the secrets of the Rex's programming gurus. Most of what he finds is of no help, it shows a crass lack of understanding of the enemy. So Bobby reinvents, gradually engaging more and more of Barkhan Seer's Point-power in the battle. Predictably, it ends up with a crash and a new pancreas. Three days after his sixteenth birthday Bobby is flatlining in Dr Fawlers' hospital. This time Dr Fawlers refuses to declare him dead. She doesn't even try to

treat him. Wisely, she leaves it entirely to the cat. Bobby is miraculously returned from the dead but comes out of hospital with a residual level of black smoke that doesn't yield and that slows down his work. The headaches have returned, making it difficult to think hyper-straight. His programming is going nowhere. He has to take some time off. Letting himself be mothered by Dr Mazbrouk, he takes excursions into Virginia's DNA, starts writing a psychology module for Family Traits, drops it in the middle – now at least the Virginias can smile without looking stupid. Dr Mazbrouk is becoming a friend. He calls her Eleonor. Using A^&~, one of the most secret computer languages of the enemy, Bobby writes a new version of Multi-V that can split his reality into 55 simultaneous channels. This allows him to reach astronomical speeds, in the 60,000 Virginias per hour, with a staggering record of 102,354.6 Vph sustained over a period of 14.7 minutes. Boy, what a headache the day after! But that's what passion does to people. The A^&~ language is awesome. In theory it should allow Bobby to write a much more muscly version of Multi-V, with far more than 55 channels. But there must be a bug in the code. The 55 channel barrier proves unsurmountable. Bobby spends an entire week looking for the bug. No luck.

After the break Bobby goes back to the P-21, fighting against the fumes. Until it becomes clear that between Virginia and him, the main wall is *not* made of P-21s, but of the infamous black smoke. As long as his soul is crippled, he will never have the strength to call on the full power of mathematics. The enemy wins. Hiram will never return from the dead.

So Bobby goes back to the shooting ground, lets the HR programs bring up the fumes, sinks into nauseating headaches, fireflying in a sea of black shit, puking in the middle of the Golden Sun, desperately calling on the White Eagle's light.

At night he dreams of Teyani. And the lake, the wooden cabin with the door he can never open.

But who is Hiram?

His dreams turn into nightmares, he fights with the cat again, wakes up with scratches all over his arms and chest, bleeding. The wounds become disgusting, covered in pus.

But who is Hiram? The haunting question.

Hiram's corpse lies behind the door that can never be opened.

Months pass, the headaches don't. Stuck in mud, Bobby thinks of committing suicide. What keeps him alive is Virginia's presence. And the mediocrity of the classified communications he reads about P-21s. These techno-dickheads don't understand mathematics. If you leave it up to them Philadelphia 6 will *never* be liberated. Virginia needs him. But Bobby doesn't feel up to it. He's just a cripple, he'll never be able to crack the code. He can't even find the damn bug that limits Multi-V to 55 channels.

The enemy is winning.

Bobby is turning seventeen.

Meanwhile, the Saint-Bernard choir has gone its way. No longer a beta-omega lame duck, it has risen to honourable beta-delta standards, meaning Bobby's friends are all scoring in the 400's. They have completed most of their units, their graduation is drawing near.

Bobby doesn't score, so graduation as a knight is not an option for him. Still he is expected to graduate in military science and engineering. The problem is, he has neglected to follow the curriculum. Sure, he has completed an extra 61 units in computing. And 214 units of mathematics (it's all you can get at the academy). But these are not transposable. He's lacking units all over the place. Not just in topics like history, strategy and tactics, but even in neurocybernetics. So he starts watching programs about Alexander the Great and Napoleon (Napoleon is of particular interest, because the enemy could be his reincarnation). But time is running out, he'll never be able to complete all these units. So instead, he sends in piles of assignments. He throws his findings on hyper-synchronicity as papers on neurocybernetics (you never know, they might accept it). To compensate for units of military engineering, he sends one of his early 4D P-21 models. But nothing better than that – fuck you, techno-dickheads! To the department of computing, he sends the clones he has programmed and a few things about HEL's languages he had concocted before he started yielding to his instinct as a mathacker. If they could see what came after this, they too would probably become suicidal. There's so much work to do, he hardly has time to keep an eye on new level-6 literature on the P-21. Anyhow, there's nothing exciting turning up on the network. So boring that one morning, Bobby wakes up with a crazy temptation.

Why not go to the source?

Why not use his mathacker's skills to crack his way straight into HEL's military resources. The enemy's computer network!

Vertical flash dispelling the fumes.

The lucid clarity of a dangerous mathacker.

Bobby gets up from his nuclear reactor and engages his arch-secret, arch-illegal hypersynchronic mathacking procedure, "Computer, access code VIRGINIA#11,867,461. I want a list of all pathways to Hyper-Earth Link's Omnipresent Network!" And he raises his fist the Philadelphian way, "Hey, Barkhan Seer!"

Today for the first time, Bobby feels ready for a showdown with the ON – the ON who fucked him to the marrow when he was completely defenceless. Now the wheel has turned. He is no longer a powerless sleeper. He is a dangerous mathacker, a mathematical warrior who has returned from many a crusade in archetypal lands.

Mathacker's instincts. Tremble, enemy! I am coming.

The bell of the cabin door rings. "Lieutenant Tor@ of the Central Security Service."

Fuck!

They found him.

Taken by a wave of panic, Bobby instantly turns his P-21 home into a simple 3 by 3 cabin with a mattress and a sleeping cat. Should he delete all his secret data?

It means losing months of work, but it might save him months in jail.

"Are you there Bobby Elmian?"

After a split second of superastral deliberation, Bobby decides against erasing the fruits of his research. Anyway, the CSS has probably secured copies of all his data already. He logs off the system.

But if he goes to jail, who will take care of Virginia?

"Bobby Elmian?" The bell rings again.

"Come in, Lieutenant."

The door opens. The lieutenant, a huge chunk of muscle, stays outside. Bobby immediately notices his phaser, a thin 1 cm-long cylinder attached to the last phalanx of his right index finger. Resistance is futile, especially now that Bobby has logged off.

"You are Bobby Elmian of beta-delta Saint-Bernard choir?" he checks in a neutral voice.

"Yes, sir."

"Come with me!" The balance of power is so much tipped in his favour that he doesn't even bother gravito-handcuffing Bobby, he just walks by his side. He takes him to a heavy-duty lift that dives deep into Titan's depths, leading to a cold, empty metallic bowel. After much bifurcating they arrive at a massive metallic portal guarded by six men armed with phaser rifles. The one-metre thick doors slide open, slowly, silently. Bobby walks in. The doors slide closed behind him. Another security officer, a stern looking woman with dark-blue hair and a phaser rifle, takes him through yet another empty corridor, till they reach a large conference room with a round table in the middle.

Six officers are sitting at one end of the table. One of them is but a blurred mosaic image, meaning he's here in AR to disguise his identity.

Bobby stands still-straight-stiff to salute them. High anxiety gnawing his stomach. Cold sweat down his back. He recognises commander R(ou)x, the techno-dickhead with a pubic hair transplant under his nose.

The presiding officer points to an empty chair at the other end of the table, "Be seated, Elmian. I am Colonel Perry. These are Colonel Fr#zer and Commander Mohan from the Central Security Service, Commander R(ou)x and Commander Apax from Strategic Studies," he says in a neutral voice, leaving the blurry figure unintroduced. "We have a number of questions to ask you."

So this is Colonel William Perry, TS5's boss, whom Szar describes as a powerful spiritual teacher. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a square head, very short hair and a lighthouse-Point radiating Barkhan Seer's light. He looks like the warmth of the Brown Robe must be with him when he smiles but he isn't smiling, he is staring at Bobby with a grave look in his

eyes, like he has already Point-scanned him and he knows there's heavy shit going on.

"It seems you have been carrying out research on your own, Elmian," Perry begins. "Can you tell us why you didn't inform anyone of these projects?"

What a ridiculous question! Bobby's findings are based on stacks of stolen level-6 intel. Did these guys really expect him to go trumpeting about it all around the network? Start the *Mathackers' P-21 Virtual Gazette*, perhaps?

Bobby prefers to keep silent. A tacit acknowledgment of his crimes.

The officers are looking at him with intense curiosity, probably because it's not every day they catch someone who's fucked with them undetected for so many months.

Perry keeps scanning Bobby's Point for a minute or so, then asks, "You must have needed help at times. Didn't you try to get technical support from your superiors?"

"I did, sir. In the beginning," Bobby says.

"This is correct!" R(ou)x confirms. "Two years ago I was contacted by Elmian. Because the request concerned level-4 classified material and came from a first year undergraduate student who hadn't yet completed one unit of military engineering, I decided to wait and see."

Which, said in the techno-dickhead's words, nearly makes sense.

"And you decided *not* to wait," Perry continues. "But you must have spoken to other scientists about your work."

"It's absolutely essential that we know who you communicated with. Inside and outside TS5," CSS Colonel Fr#zer adds.

Boy, does that guy look creepy! A man in his late fifties with dark hair, dark eyes, dark rings underneath them, and a disturbing way of seemingly looking sideways when he's looking you in the eyes. He and Mohan are wearing dark-grey softmetal suits. The Central Security Service isn't part of the brotherhood of the knights.

"I only spoke to my virtual tutors, sir. Clones of Colonel Varga, Colonel Lee, Dr Rashi, Dr Eleonor Mazbrouk and Master Szar of the Brown Robe."

That doesn't seem to count. Logical, in a way, since Bobby's dealings with his virtual friends are strictly confidential, confined to his own secluded information space on the network. Privacy is sacred to the knights.

"Elmian, there is nothing wrong with scientists exchanging information," Fr#zer throws in, feigning a reassuring tone. "We just need to know *exactly* who you spoke with. As it happens, your 4D model of the P-21 space mine bears disturbingly close resemblances to that of another team of scientists."

"4D? My model isn't 4D, sir!" Bobby frowns. "I gave up all 4D models more than a year ago." Then...

Oh shit!

In a flash, Bobby realises these guys have *no idea* where his work is at. Meaning they haven't been tapping his cabin. They might not even know

about the mathacking! They've just been fooled by the lousy 4D model that Bobby threw in for an assignment.

Now they're all staring at him, waiting for a revelation.

"You mean you have developed other models?" Perry asks, still Point-reading him.

But shit! Shit! Shit! Why couldn't he keep his fucking mouth shut? Now there's no way he can expand without confessing his mathacker's misfits. He's just thrown himself into the pit in two sentences.

"Help! Oh, mathematical sky, help!" he silently calls with all the strength of his Point.

At this stage if *one* thing can save him, it's mathematics, which some call God.

"Elmian, we have good ground to believe someone has leaked. Someone who spoke to you, or someone you spoke to," the CSS colonel comes back to the charge. He makes his voice threatening. "Why not save us all a lot of time and tells us who?"

From the mathematical sky a response is on its way. A mighty light.

Fight with the Truth, man of the Law!

The massive power of an archetypal revelation.

"No one has spoken to me, sir. I found the information I needed myself."

Fra#zer takes on a condescending voice, "Meaning you maruded the network, is that it?"

Bobby is finding a second breath, "Yes, sir!"

"Bullshit!" Fr#zer yells, hits the table with his fist. "The only thing you've ever maruded was Iapetus Retirement Village."

"No, sir!"

"Don't fuck with me, young man," the CSS colonel stands up, pointing his finger at Bobby. "Get one thing right: someone is about to be charged with treason. If you want to say you have nothing to do with him and you're just a loner who hacked his way through the network undetected by all anti-maruding teams, you'd better be able to prove it!"

Oh.

Does this mean to say... Bobby needs to *prove* he has been mathacking the network in order to show his innocence?

"I can prove I did it, sir!"

The CSS colonel raises his hands and smiles ironically, "Show us!"

Bobby invokes, "Computer, access code VIRGINIA#11,867,461." Just saying the magic name brings him the courage to go on, "I want a listing of all level-6 classified communications on the P-21s published in the last 6 months."

Instantly, two virtual panels appear: on the right, the list of articles on P-21; on the left, a list of access nodes on the network.

Recognising titles of their own articles, R(ou)x and Apax become pale. Perry grins, like suddenly this meeting is becoming much more interesting.

Meanwhile, CSS officers Fr#zer and Mohan are frantically monitoring virtual consoles, trying to find out what the hell is going on here.

But when Perry realises that the list of figures on the left panel are nodes leading to the Rex's ON, he too becomes pale, "Do you mean you've been mathacking Hyper-Earth Link?"

"I was just about to begin, sir."

Perry puts his hand on his mouth, thoughtful..

"Colonel!" Mohan reports, "there is no trace of the present transaction on any of our firewall mechanisms. This... this is just *not* happening."

Not happening? For mathematics' sake! Bobby is sitting very straight, outraged, "Would you like me to go on, sir?"

"No!" Perry raises both hands. "That will do."

"But what kind of algorithms are you using?" Mohan chokes.

"Hypersynchronic?" R(ou)x guesses.

"Exactly, sir! A reworking of Simon's hypersynchronicity." To gain the edge, Bobby takes the adversary into his own territory. A quick briefing on how Simon himself never believed in his last theorem, which must be replaced by a series of hyper-equations in order to compensate for the inequality of the second theorem of hypersynchronicity. He speaks fast, watching the officers become slightly uncomfortable, like now they are running after him, not the opposite. "I can show you how I applied it to..."

The blurred silhouette sitting by Perry's side interrupts him. "Later!" he says, in an excessively low-pitched voice, so grounded it seems to come from under the floor. "Tell us about your superastral model of the P-21."

Whoever that creep may be, he/she/it has a sense of authority.

"Yes, sir!" Bobby stands up and conjures up his VR reconstruction of the P-21's bowels. A few metres above he projects a 3D-flatened version of his 5D model and starts demonstrating how the above fits with the below, using a computer generated simulation he has written specially for the P-21.

"What's this moving shape, there?" R(ou)x uses a laser beam to point to a brown stem moving back and forth.

Oh, shit. Why did they have to notice that?

"It's an artefact, sir."

"What artefact?"

"The tail of a cat who lives in my cabin, sir. Multidimensional models make him playful."

Colonel Perry can't believe his ears. "You mean you've turned your cabin into a P-21?"

"Yes, sir. Getting to know the enemy from inside." Bobby quickly moves back to the mathematical side of his communication, flooding the audience with hypersynchronic formulae. He concludes by saying that if his model is right, he should be able to marude a P-21 into not exploding, but that as long as he hasn't finished reverse-engineering the software he won't be 100% sure.

Flabbergasted silence.

R(ou)x catches his breath, "Which language have you been using?"

"I tried Z08, NetAssembly and Q. But now I am *convinced* the enemy has used the new and much more sophisticated A^&~."

A^&~ is another level-6 classified tidbit. So obscure that there are less than a hundred communications about it on the entire network. The fact that Bobby can program in A^&~ is a gross insult to the CSS.

"Are you talking about this A... A-squiggle-thing?" Colonel Fr#zer asks, perplexed. Only connoisseurs know how to pronounce the name of the mysterious language.

"A^&~, sir," Bobby rectifies.

"Fr#zer, give him the job!" the blurred mosaic orders.

"Yes, sir," Fr#zer acknowledges, while the blurry thing is fading from the room.

"This brings us to the second part of this meeting," Perry announces. "Now that you have convinced us the 4D model of your assignment wasn't found in a trash can, we have a mission to offer you. As TS5's commander in chief, it is my duty to inform you that you do not have to accept this mission."

Fr#zer takes over, "The CSS has located a stray P-21 mine, 0.6 a.u. north of the orbit of Uranus. We have no idea how it got there. Could be the misfired leftover of tests. Could also be a trap. I'm sending an expedition. I need maruders. Want to be in it?"

Bobby stands up, "Yes, sir!" Inspired from the mathematical sky, he adds, "I believe I have a good chance of bringing it home."

"Bring the P-21 home?" Fr#zer gulps. "That's not part of the plan! You just study it from a distance, praying *you* can bring your ass home."

What? Give up on such a unique opportunity? Over his dead body.

Virginia, I am on my way!

"Stray P-21s are not only vulnerable but also extremely rare, sir. As far as I know, none has ever been reported in the literature. By not trying to capture it, we might be wasting a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

They're listening, but how far can Bobby push this? He calls onto Barkhan Seer, lets the Archive flow through his Point, "Besides, the thing we need the most at this stage is the mine's software, which will not be revealed to us from a distance. I suspect there is a lot we don't know about A^&~, which is why, so far, no one has been able to crack the superastral model of Big Alfredo and Pasteur missiles."

"All right!" Fr#zer decides, "I give you 36 hours to come up with a convincing plan. If it makes sense we'll consider trying to bring the P-21 home."

"Anything else, gentlemen?" Perry asks.

The meeting is closed.

Hiram himself wouldn't have done better.

2.42 Hiram's corpse

"The P-21 will be within scanning range in five minutes, sir!" Lieutenant K&t announces. "It doesn't seem to be talking to anyone. The entire electromagnetic spectrum is clear and empty."

Which doesn't mean anything. No one has ever been able to detect the P-21's communication system.

On the bridge of battle cruiser Arjuna, there is a tense silence. The captain and his five officers are waiting, wondering which will come first: Commander R(ou)x's order to move away from the mine, or the deadly call of the siren.

In an adjacent room, R(ou)x, Apax and Bobby are sitting together, their Points joined in a tightly-woven triangular net – one of the most powerful techniques Bobby has been taught during his four-week training with Roux and the Point-wizards of the CSS. Under their guidance, he has learnt more about maruding than in three years at the academy. Under his guidance, R(ou)x and Apax have become familiarised with the P-21's 5D model.

Now the space mine is less that 1,000 km away.

The moment of truth is coming. They are about to discover if Bobby's model is right.

If it is, they deactivate the nuking device, abduct the princess, take her to a slick brand-new CSS station around Titan. There, Bobby is in for a cannibalistic feast hacking into the enemy's A^&~ code, Philadelphia 6 within heart range. *Virginia, I am on my way!*

If it isn't, they just scan it from as close as they can without blowing their ass. Which probably won't bring much new material to Bobby. Farewell Virginia. Till another life, perhaps.

In between the is and the isn't, there are plenty of ugly other scenarios. A huge flare is to be expected, just like when Penelope has an orgasm.

Bobby doesn't like R(ou)x's body odour. He finds it disturbingly acrid like, dirty instincts are hidden behind his clean bald face. But what a Point! Pairing with the tall big man makes Bobby feel on top of the worlds, mathematically invulnerable.

Except when he has a headache, like today.

Then the Point-pairing's luminous intensity only make things worse, with black fumes gushing into his head and uncontrollable nausea that doesn't get better with vomiting.

Bobby is disgusted at himself for being such an invalid. After so many months of expectation, he is in for his first date with a P-21. At last. And here he is, running with his hands on his stomach, unable to stop himself from puking before reaching the toilet unit.

"K&t to R(ou)x! The P-21 will be within short scanner range in three minutes, commander."

A totally calm R(ou)x stands by Bobby's side, "Brother, let's practise a few seconds of eye contact."

Through the fumes, Bobby locks his gaze into the commander's.

From his Point, R(ou)x applies a mighty uplifting force above Bobby's head, pulling thick smoke out of his system.

"Thanks, it's better already," Bobby rubs his forehead.

Within fifteen seconds, the fumes are back.

The message finally comes through, "Commander, we're receiving the call of the siren."

The ship is starting to drift towards the mine.

"Acknowledged!"

R(ou)x gives the signal. Now the three knights can Point-tune into the P-21. There are only 40 seconds left before the ship reaches the point of no escape. And another 120 seconds before the mine explodes.

Dead-still, Bobby is Point-scanning, using the siren's call as a thread.

R(ou)x is the first to Point-lock on the target. "I've got it! But there is no hypercone. It's *not* our model!"

Resonating with R(ou)x's Point, Apax and Bobby immerse their consciousness into the mine's model. But Bobby's sight is clouded, he is slow to map the structure.

"R(ou)x to Captain Lorraine! Move us out of here, fast!"

"No, tell him to wait! It *is* my model!" Bobby recognises.

"On hold, captain!" R(ou)x orders.

"Negative, Bobby! This is not your model," Apax agrees with R(ou)x.

"Yes it is!" These techno-dickheads have brave hearts, but they're hopeless when it comes to 5D. "The hypercone is revolving around an ana-ana-hyperspace of symmetry. I've got it in my point. Tune in!"

"Where?" Apax is Point-groping.

Bobby's Point is swamped with venomous fumes. Makes it hard for them to find their way.

"I can't see that cone!" R(ou)x says. "I give you ten seconds to take control of the device if you can."

"Will do." To fight the ignominious filth in his head, Bobby Point-draws from Barkhan Seer's light. But the sudden upsurge of power upsets his system, he finds himself flushed with black muck.

But where is it coming from?

From nowhere. That doesn't make it any less powerful.

It's a tidal wave. Blackness everywhere. It covers three quarters of the solar system, with tentacles extending beyond Proserpine's orbit. The Sun is immune, but for how much longer? Terrifying vision of darkness – if the Sun were to be taken over, then everything would be lost.

Bobby is about to be engulfed. Again.

Silent scream. Not now! Please, not now!

Calling with every fibre of his being. Not now, please! Virginia!

Virginia, help me!

The Beast, his infamous lover, is taking him in its arms.

Insidiously permeating his being. Reminding him, "You are mine!"

"Rest in my bosom. Sleep."

Screaming. No, not now! Screaming. Please, Teyani! Teyani, help!

The woman clad in white is by his side, always. She extends her hand towards him.

Above her, a gigantic light. White light beyond all limits, brighter than a million suns.

The light of the White Eagle. The power of Highness.

"And so what?" the beast reminds him. Each time Bobby falls in its arms, he sees the light. It has never saved him from falling.

Highness and the abyss are so close to each other.

At the moment of falling, they seem one and the same.

Sinking into darkness.

In the darkness, we are already dead. We sleep.

"R(ou)x to captain, get us out of here!"

"The ship is out of control Commander! The P-21 has taken over. Engines 1 to 12 have stopped responding."

"Already? That's impossible! Bobby!" R(ou)x yells, "For God's sake, do something! We're all going to die!"

Silent howl, No! No! No-o-o-o! If death comes now, then Virginia will end up in the pit.

The pit which is nowhen and everywhen.

Looking for a thread to the light, desperately.

The White Eagle is fading. Below, there is but darkness, surrounded by darkness.

Teyani, I call onto you! I call onto the holy name of your lineage!

"To him who holds the power," Teyani whispers, "darkness and light are one. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be."

But who holds the power?

"Hiram!"

Who is Hiram?

Screaming, "Who is Hiram? Who is Hiram?"

In the cabin, K&t voice falls like a verdict, "Sixty seconds to impact! Proceed to the nearest evacuation-shuttle."

"We're not going anywhere," R(ou)x tells Apax.

"Lorraine to R(ou)x. For God's sake commander, move! Rally shuttle 12 on deck 3."

"Waste of time, Captain! The shuttles will be caught by the siren." R(ou)x turns to Bobby, raises both hands, invokes with all his strength, "Barkhan Seer!"

In Archive Hall 5 Barkhan Seer, Firen Seer and Semper are projecting the Word, three hundred generations of Thunder behind them.

Bobby is in free fall, remembering Sigfr!d, the Panther, the redballs and the ON inspectors, Simon's second theorem of hypersynchronicity, the lake. The cabin at the lake.

Walking on the veranda.

The door can't be opened. What is behind is too horrible.

Teyani makes her voice forceful, "Open the door!"

Infinite sorrow. The pain of a world without hope.

"Remember the woman whose head is in the stars, her feet in your time track. Open the door!"

Virginia. She is the one. But her appointment isn't with Bobby. The man she loves is Hiram.

"Leave the door closed, and Virginia ends up in the abyss."

Scream of Agony.

R(ou)x shouts at him, "Bobby, hold it! Hold it!"

So Virginia never loved Bobby. The one she has been waiting for is Hiram. Whose corpse lies on the other side.

A light wooden door. It is not even locked.

If Bobby opens it, hope is dead. If he doesn't, Virginia is lost.

Teyani, a White hurricane. She has engaged all her power.

Infinitely White, endlessly deep like a Cosmic Night, eternity condensed into a point, rich with fifty thousand years of Archive history, a knower of all the secrets of Revelation Sky, Teyani's love, the Mother of the Light smiling, Bobby opens the door.

There he lies, his body grossly mutilated, his light extinguished.

But he is not Hiram!

Of course not.

Hiram conquered the secret.

Hiram lives. Forever and ever. Aeons and super-aeons.

He left his keys at No Limits.

The corpse is Bobby's.

It is Bobby who is dead.

In one final flash, he understands.

"I am Hiram!"

Luminous clarity. All fumes dispelled. Holding the P-21's model from the pinnacle of Revelation Sky. Embraced by Virginia's presence, from the Great Ant to the Fault of eternity. Bobby's corpse can stay at the bottom of the Abyss. Where Ahriman rules, unchallenged.

"Commander! Commander! The Arjuna has stopped moving!"

"R(ou)x to Lorraine. Confirm!"

"The siren's call has stopped. The Arjuna is no longer drifting towards the mine. Looks like... you made it, Commander!"

3.1 Rendezvous in the Golden Sun

When Bobby lands back on Titan, he is a different man – Hiram.

There's a gigantic sunrise illuminating his heart, the light of the World to Come. It's the absolute virtual drug, beyond endorphins. Liquid gold flowing through your blood. It fills you with irrational strength, like you can do anything – *anything!* – because the World to Come is with you. And every step you walk has meaning. It brings the world closer to its glorious completion, the Great Dawn, the time when all is accomplished, when the world and the World to Come become one, and humanity is reborn in the Fields of Peace.

When the liquid gold flows through your blood you don't need to be told these things, you know them from inside. You know you have always known them. You have waited for the Great Dawn since the Ancient Days when the Earth was covered in mists, populated with jellyfish-looking blobs and strange beasts. For aeons, you have been groping in darkness, a wounded amnesiac desperately searching for the light. Long forgotten was the meaning of hope. And now hope has returned. The time is coming, the night is about to end. Which is why the enemy will try anything – *anything!* – to stifle the Sun and let the night drag on forever.

Apocalypse, the time when everything is possible. Everything. Even the victory of the dark side. The enemy is formidable.

But as formidable as he may be, the enemy has just lost two battles. One, Hiram is a free man, no longer chained to the abyss of darkness. Two. the P-21 has revealed all its secrets. What Bobby had begun, Hiram has brought to completion.

He has just spent three months in orbit around Titan. A slick station the CSS techno-dickheads have built up there. Labs filled with all the latest gismos, top level virtual programmers, and a knowledge bank with every single military secret you may need. Saves heaps of time when you don't have to mathack the OPA's networks in order to fish for intel. The ideal setting for a honeymoon with the P-21.

After so many months desiring it, what a sensual joy to finally place both hands on the fine alloy of the external shell, caressing the 16 metre long cylinder, devouring it with his eyes. Then, slowly, cautiously, tactfully undoing bolt after bolt, burning with expectation. Gradually undressing the bride, first with some hesitation as if this wasn't really happening or as if some resistance was bound to arise. But it didn't. Gradually gaining confidence, penetrating deeper into the hardware, still with a measure of caution. Until it became clear the subdued P-21 was giving itself unrestrictedly. Then dropping all shame and

restraint, undoing anything that could be undone, plunging to the core, discovering the language of its heart.

Jubilation – the P-21's software *was* written in A^&~!

A^&~ is much, much more complex than Bobby (and the CSS) had suspected. A^&~ is a mathematical feast, the work of a genius. Point-dazzling. But now the P-21 has been completely exposed, stripped of its last mysteries.

The wall between Virginia and Hiram has become virtual.

Feeling unstoppable, Hiram walks straight to Saint-Bernard's shooting ground, where he knows Semper is waiting for him. From Point to Point, they have communicated. Their rendezvous was arranged in the Golden Sun.

The shooting ground is empty. Semper has switched off all virtual partitions, there is just one hall, thirty metres long. In a background of dark-blue light the two men find themselves in front of each other. For a long while they do not speak, they just look into each other's eyes. From liquid gold to liquid gold, blood to blood. More than just fullness, it's brotherhood.

Semper offers, "White Line, Point-paired, your reality. Taken?"

"Taken!" Hiram sanctions with a handclap.

"White Line!" Semper invokes.

As soon as the thin vertical luminous thread appears above Hiram's head, he shoots up, taking Semper with him. The darkness of the hall is replaced by the Golden Sun's resplendent light. Lightning speed. Hiram ascends. Point-drawing from Barkhan Seer's might to further accelerate the motion.

By now, Bobby would be in the abyss.

But Hiram has conquered the abyss. His soul has been cleansed. The White Eagle is with him, for ever and ever. He can accelerate with the full power of Highness. There are no limits.

No limits!

Speed beyond all concepts. Traversing aeons in a split second, reaching Whiteness beyond all forms. The mathematical sky contained in a point, far, far below. When you become larger than the creation, all motion stops. So does time. There is but a pregnant breath of infinity. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be.

"Break!" Bobby says.

"Now..." The Golden Sun is shining though Semper's smile, "would you like to know your score?"

A second of hesitation. After having been floored for so long...

"Computer, score!" Semper clicks his fingers.

The cool computer voice answers, "The information you require is classified."

"What?" Semper frowns.

"Uh... I'm afraid a few things about me have become classified. CSS nonsense," Hiram explains. After mindswitching a series of secret codes, he asks again, "Score?"

"Bobby Elmian has reached the Absolute White Line score," the computer answers.

Wave of perplexity. "What's that mean?"

Semper slams his shoulder, "Means you've gone beyond the scoring range, brother. Your performance can't be evaluated or compared."

But that's not fair! Hiram wanted a *real* maruding score. At least 600! For three months he's been burning to know what he could hope to achieve now that he's no longer a cripple.

Semper can see his disappointment. "Try something else," he suggests.

"Firefly!" Hiram immediately invokes, bringing a thin cloud of blue dots. The computer takes it easy with him because last time Bobby played this hyper-game his score was pathetic. Try to firefly while puking at the same time and you'll see why. Hiram quickly reddens the dots, patiently waiting for the computer to speed up the flow. But while he's gearing himself for the onslaught, his Point notices the game's superastral model. It's a trivial warp of 3D shapes with highly predictable motions, the kind of low-security device R(ou)x and acolytes call porridge superastrality because you can marude it without having to interrupt your breakfast.

Hiram can't resist the temptation, he Point-enters the superastral model and takes over the hyper-game module, triggering a tidal wave of orange dots.

"Excellent!" Semper gives a handclap in satisfaction. "Excellent!"

There are thick stormy clouds coming from all directions, but there's nothing that needs to be done with them. They're orange by birth. Hiram speeds up the flow, pushing it as far as the machine can take. "Am I going to get a score for this?"

"Negative, Bobby. But you're going to get an interesting message from the computer," the lieutenant answers.

Intrigued, Hiram interrupts the firefly. "Score?"

The computer answers, "Bobby Elmian qualifies for joining an alpha-alpha choir. Lieutenant Semper will give all relevant information."

Oh.

Biting his lip, Hiram looks Semper in the eyes, calling on the Golden Sun's compassion, "I am... sorry, Lieutenant, but... I cannot accept this promotion. I am going to leave."

"I know."

So much love in Semper's eyes.

Bobby feels the need to explain, "It's not that I don't like TS5 but I have no choice, I *must* go..."

"I know," Semper nods.

How do you thank someone for leading you on the path to immortality? Hesitantly, "You have given... a lot."

"I have given to you, so in turn you may give." The Great Dawn shining through his smile, "We shall meet again in the Fields of Peace!"

3.2 Farewell

"So when you're not dead you just fucking disappear without even leaving a message!" she yells, stubbornly keeping her distance from him.

Boy, is she pissed off.

"I'm sorry Pen, these assholes didn't leave me any choice."

"That's bullshit! You can marude the hell out of the network! And you didn't even bother dropping a line in my mailbox! All you needed to say was, 'Hello I'm okay, I'll be back soon.' Do you realise what a nightmare it was?" She keeps yelling, "First I was told you'd been transferred to a hospital around Saturn for some 'life-threatening medical emergency'. No details. Then after I checked every single hospital bed on this side of the solar system, the network started telling me you were no longer part of the knights, would I please mind my own business and stay out of your files. All your accounts had been erased, I was even denied access to your cabin!"

"But it was the truth, Pen. I was being employed by the CSS, so I..."

"And so what?" She keeps turning up the volume, "When the knights work for the CSS, they remain knights!"

"But I haven't graduated as a knight, Pen," he tries to temper her fury with a very calm voice. "Technically, all I am is a CSS agent."

"Oh, right! Why are you still wearing your knight's uniform then?"

"Because I'm here incognito. No one is supposed to know I work for the CSS. Even the logbook of my toilet unit has become top secret." To create a diversion, he turns to his gravito-field, "Computer, when was the last time someone pissed in here?"

The computer's muffled voice replies, "This information is classified."

"See!"

"Classified my ass!" she raises both fists. "Two months ago, Semper told Saint-Bernard you were with the fucking CSS!"

"Did he? But how did he find out? It's supposed to be level 6!"

If Colonel Fr#zer knew about this, he'd be extremely upset.

"We all know it's level 6!" Penny screams. "But what do you think? We are knights, we can keep our mouths shut. If you had contacted us, we would have done just the same. But the truth is, you don't give a shit about anyone, not even your cat!"

"Pen, listen..." he tries to come closer to her.

"Stay away!" With her two hands, she pushes him back violently. "Do you realise even the cat was looking for you everywhere? During the six weeks that followed your dematerialisation, he turned up at just about every single meeting of Saint-Bernard. Once when I was crying, he even jumped on my lap and he purred. But why should you care?"

"All right," Hiram raises his voice, "yell at me! As much as you want. And if it makes you happy to know, it *does* hurt me."

"No, I don't want to hurt you." She bursts into tears and asks in a little voice, "You're not going to come back, are you?"

He shakes his head, slowly. "I'm sorry. I *must* go."

"Why are you here, then?"

"Because I had to tell you face to face where I am going and why. And also that I love you," Hiram says, coming closer, taking her in his arms.

This time she doesn't resist him. She rests her head on his shoulder, crying big sobs. "What's so fantastic about being a secret agent?"

"I don't want to have anything to do with the CSS. I've just tendered my resignation. I have accepted a job with the Philadelphian Air Force."

"Where?"

"Mothership 7 Neurocybernetic Institute."

"No, I don't want you to go there!" she beats his chest with her fist. Hard. "It's too dangerous. If you fuck with the P-21s you're going to get killed, I *know*. I just *know* it."

"Penny, I found the key to the P-21."

"I'm not asking you to tell me anything about this!" she shouts. "I know it's top secret."

"But I want you to know!" he whispers in her ear. "The model in which we made love was 98% right. Enough to capture a P-21, bring it back here, open all the boxes, discover *all* the secrets."

"Did you do that?" she asks, bewildered.

He kisses her ear, "Yes I did. Now I must go and give what I found to the Philadelphians."

"No, don't go! Not just because I love you. The situation is getting worse and worse over there. The 5th battle of Mercury could start any day."

As a CSS agent, Hiram is well enough informed to know this is the pure truth.

"Why do you have to go?" she insists. "Can't you just send them the info they need."

"It's not as simple as that. The P-21 is a delicate little thing. The info is not enough, what they need is the know-how."

"Why don't you graduate as a knight first, then go?"

"The Rex is at their door, they're desperate. They can't wait. Anyway, they said they'd complete my training in the knighthood. I might even be able to join one of the alpha-alpha choirs posted on Mothership 7."

"Great! Go and get butchered at the frontline abattoir! The pilots of MS7 have the highest casualty rate in the knights' history."

"Pen..." Hiram Point-draws from Barkhan Seer and lets a mighty breath flow through his voice, "Pen, I don't intend to get butchered, I intend to liberate Philadelphia 6. I have a plan for this. I know it sounds impossible but doing impossible things is exactly what the Apocalypse is about. Capturing a P-21 was completely impossible too. And yet I did it."

Shaken by the power in his words, Penelope closes her eyes. "What's happened to you Bobby? You sound... so different."

"Bobby is dead! I left him in space, 0.6 a.u. north of the orbit of Uranus. Now I am Hiram," he says, fierce.

Intrigued, she lightly touches his face with her hand. "Who is Hiram?"

"A damn stubborn asshole who *never* gives up."

Penny feels her legs go soft.

She cries, "Make love to me!"

3.3 White cat, black cat

Hiram is to cross the blockade with nineteen squadrons of volunteers piloting Scalene 296s. Operation Oxygen. A desperately needed supply of fresh blood for the Philadelphian Air Force.

Each pilot is allowed to take 1.75 cubic metres of RR personal effects with him or her (virtual things don't count, they can just be dumped into the craft's computer). The detailed list of RR items is to be submitted to the OPA flight authority.

When Hiram VR-calls the flight authority, a middle-aged woman asks him mechanically, her eyes fixed on her virtual console, "Please submit your list of items. According to solar system regulations 1647B and ZK241, organic substances including plants and all forms of food as well as animals may be required to undergo quarantine by the Philadelphian customs authorities. Weapons of all descriptions including collectors' items, knives, kitchen-knives, lasers and kitchen-lasers require special permits unless part of the standard equipment of your combat unit. How many items would you like to submit?"

"Three."

The woman lets go of her console to take a closer look at Hiram. "Is that all, sir?"

When he nods, she asks with a mixture of curiosity and emotion, like this young man must be going through a deep crisis, "Which items?"

"1) A 200 by 145 by 36 mattress, 2) a duvet, 3) a pillow. Items 2 and 3 are both made of GG337 feathers and S24 silk."

As she looks at him insistently, he turns his hands skywards, "Ma'am, it's all I've got."

She resumes her professional tone, like she doesn't want to be nosy, and anyway there's nothing shameful about being poor, especially when you're seventeen. "GG337 feathers must be declared on a quarantine form B312 and presented on arrival for inspection by Philadelphian customs officers, who will have full licence to turn them back according to solar system regulation ZK241. How much cash do you intend to take with you?"

"What?"

She looks at him with a motherly attitude, like he's her new social work case study. "How much money do you have?" she asks patiently.

"I have no idea. Computer, how much money is in my account?"

"Net account: 504,264.22 credits," the computer answers.

The woman's eyes open wide with astonishment, "half a million credits?"

Hiram isn't sure what to do at this stage. "Does that sound right?" To him the figure is abstract. He never spends money. Virtual things are free, and mathematical archetypes aren't for sale.

"Sounds like your VAC is smarter than mine!" she says. "How much of this sum do you want me to transfer to a Philadelphian account?"

"All of it. I don't intend to come back."

"Does your VAC agree with this transfer?" she frowns, knowing very well that the Philadelphian stock market isn't exactly the safest place for half a million credits to prosper.

Hiram speaks from his heart, "My decision is final!"

"As you want, sir. Wishing you good luck!" End of communication.

Then Hiram questions, "Computer, what's a VAC?"

Answer, "VAC: common abbreviation for virtual accountant. A fund manager who takes care of your financial accounts, files your tax returns and makes sure your savings are invested in rewarding portfolios."

Sounds mysterious. "Do I have a VAC?"

"Your finances have been managed by the talented Elias Sharamollon, the campus' VAC. Would you like me to call him for you?"

"No. Just make sure he is transferred into my library of clones."

The library of clones is by far the most important item Hiram is taking with him. Virtually essential! Without it, he would still be able to meet Szar, Varga, Lee, Rashi and Mazbrouk in the Philadelphias, since all computers of the knights hold copies of these programs. But the clones would no longer recognise him. They wouldn't have any recollection of the conversations they had together. His best friends would have become strangers. It would be like starting all over again.

So when Hiram gets into the Scalene 296, his virtual logbook will be copied into the craft's computer. He has actually planned to have all his virtual friends sit with him on the flight deck during the journey. There'll be plenty of time to talk, it will be lovely.

There is, however, one major problem. Hiram doesn't hold a copy of Mat's cat. And there's no guarantee he'll be able to find this brand new super-slick hyperprogram in the Philadelphian libraries. Even if he did, it wouldn't be the same, the cat wouldn't know him. Sad to think of such a beautiful friendship wasted.

Life without this cat would never be the same!

Furthermore, Hiram has often thought that the cat was the only person who understood his mathematical art. Hard to put into words but each time he concocted something *really* brilliant, there was like some unsaid superastral current passing between the cat and him, a mathematical complicity. No way he's going to let go of this without at least trying to mathack a copy for himself.

Plan A: find Mat. "Computer, Access code VIRGINIA#11,867,461," he invokes. "Engage priority search for Mat Donohoo!" Now Hiram's mathacking procedures have been enhanced by a full library of supercharged hyperlogic routines he pinched from the CSS. And of course, he has full clearance over TS5's network. It makes it nearly too easy to navigate in classified waters. And also much less fun.

Mat's whereabouts are protected by a firewall which Hiram finds interesting, but which hasn't been designed to resist the pounding of his heavy artillery. It's more like a fence to keep smatterers away.

Rather than engaging in a mathackers' dual, Mat immediately makes himself available for Hiram, establishing a VR link.

It's not without emotion that Hiram finds himself facing the great Mat Donohoo, the genius who created one of the most powerful maruding weapons of all times. He's an excessively tall young man, more than two metres high, but skeleton thin, with a weird elongated face at least 2.5 times longer than it's wide, no hair but a long beard, and a pair of coal-black eyes with worrying reddish hues where they're supposed to be white. Reminds Bobby of a track-the-magard game Sigfr!d was particularly fond of.

"What can I do for you Bobby Elmian?" Neutral, cautious smile. The master is on guard.

What do you tell someone to whom you owe your life?

"I wanted to thank you, Mat," Hiram says, shining the warmth of Barkhan Seer's liquid gold. "Your cat has been fantastic to me."

"You're welcome, brother," Mat slightly bends his head forwards, "Is this why you were mathacking my firewall?"

"No, I have a favour to ask. I'm leaving town. I'd like a copy of the cat."

Mat's face closes off. "Sorry, that's impossible."

Hiram didn't expect it to be easy. He has prepared his case. "Look, I've come to regard this cat as one of my close relatives. Besides," he uses CSS secret reconnaissance words, "if security is a problem, I could probably get you an exemption for confidential material disclosure..."

"Don't insist, it's out of the question."

"All right! Then from mathacker to mathacker... if you're not allowed to give me the copy, will you give me permission to steal it? Mathacker's word, *no one* will see a thing. All you have to do is disconnect the VR conversation right now."

Mat smiles, amused, but doesn't disconnect the VR link.

"I have a present for you by the way," Hiram goes on. To be credible, he needs to show he's got the mathacking muscle to snap the cat prog from the network unnoticed by the hordes of techno-dickheads. "I made significant improvements to your Family Traits. Among other things, I've added a full psychology module to it, and a reworking of Simon's hypersynchronic algorithms. Nothing you couldn't have done yourself but as you know, these things take time. I sent a copy of the files to your mailbox. I also managed to send a copy to your father through the Venusian blockade." Which was no small mathacker's feat.

"Bobby," Mat matches Hiram's Point-intensity, "if you ever come back to Titan, make contact. I think I'd like to work with someone like you. But as to what you're asking me now... I really can't."

Hiram concedes defeat with a nod. And he bites his lip, a habit he's caught from Szar over the months without even noticing.

After the conversation he collapses on the floor of the empty cabin and ponders. On the one hand, there's the temptation to fight on. Hiram is a damn stubborn asshole who never gives up, it's a vow he has taken long ago in a

fucking past life and reiterated life after life, no matter how much trouble it cost. So how about a mathacker's hunt, grand style? But on the other hand, after all Mat has done for him, he'd be a fucking bastard if he did anything that could harm him.

So what to do?

"Cat, please come! I miss you."

No answer. Of course, cats are cats.

"Cat, I *know* I should have sent you a message when I was away, and I do regret that. But in two hours I'll be leaving Titan. If you don't come now, we'll never see each other again!"

The red-light-locked cabin door is mysteriously forced open. In the doorway, Mat's cat.

"Praise the Great Apollo!" Hiram springs to his feet.

But the playful animal has already disappeared into the corridor. Hiram runs after him. It's a mad race, fiesta mode. The cat makes himself visible to everyone so Hiram looks like a nut running after an AR cat. Hiram defends himself, counter-mathacking as he runs, hiding the cat from other people. The cat starts running back and forth. Now Hiram looks even more like a nut, running back and forth for no visible reason. The cat takes Hiram into a restricted area but that's okay, Hiram's CSS pass can get him anywhere. They run through large empty warehouses full of piles of boxes and strange barrels, cross a genetic lab with long rows of cages where smart chimpanzees clap their hands and yell in jubilation, giving a jungle feel to the party.

Finally, they arrive at an entrance guarded by two men in arms.

Hiram slows down, takes on a dignified attitude, lets the guards check his ID, walks to the next crossing, then starts running after the cat again, laughing, "You're taking me somewhere! I know you are!"

At the end of a narrow, empty corridor, the cat runs through a closed door and disappears.

Being in RR, Hiram has to find a way to open the door. He mindswitches his mathacking weapons online, starts the auscultation of the door's defence system.

Surprise! The door is protected by Mat's firewall.

So is this where the genius lives?

The firewall bears Mat's stamp but it's significantly thicker than what Hiram had to cross to establish verbal contact. Breaking through this door would be no piece of cake. Anyway, it's not the point.

"Cat! Cat! What are you asking me to do?" Hiram takes his head in his hands. "I can't *possibly* break into Mat's cabin!"

No response. Clearly, the cat is waiting for him inside.

Hiram Point-calls, "Please! Don't ask me that. I *can't*!"

Oh shit! Yet another heart-breaking dilemma again. RR life is impossible, it never stops! "Mother of the Light, please get this cat to come out!"

But then why should a cat answer to the Mother of the Light? After waiting a few minutes, Hiram tries to ring the doorbell, just in case.

No answer.

Deeply saddened, Hiram decides he *will not* force his way into Mat's cabin. So he turns round and starts walking away, tears in his eyes.

But behind him the door clicks open.

Turning back, he sees a wood through the doorway. Nice Trompe l'Oeil.

If the door is opened for him, then it's not trespassing. It's an invitation.

He runs into the room.

"Oh, waooh! Far out, what is *that*?"

The wood is *not* Trompe l'Oeil AR. The trees are real. And the room is huge, at least twenty metres long with a high ceiling. Incredulous, Hiram walks on RR dirt, touching RR bushes with his hands. It's the first time Hiram sees a RR tree. He finds it incredibly sensual, completely unvirtual.

A few metres further in, there comes the *big* surprise.

"Oh no!"

Right in front of him, there's a small gravito-field with a RR Siamese cat inside.

The RR cat jumps out of the gravito-field, projects himself into Hiram's arms and starts purring.

Flabbergasted Hiram falls onto his back.

"You mean... you are a *real* cat?"

The RR cat rolls on the ground with him, rubbing his whiskers against his cheeks, purring madly, scratching him a bit but nothing serious.

"Oh shit! Shit!" Hiram bursts into tears. "Why can't you be virtual? If you are real, then *really* I will never see you again!"

The eternal problem with RR people – you always end up losing them.

At that moment Hiram notices another gravito-field, with another cat in it. Not a Siamese. A black cat. Sleeping.

"You even have a friend!" Hiram moves close to the gravito-field.

Someone shouts, "Don't touch the black cat!"

Hiram recoils and turns back. A man is running into the room.

"Stand back!" the man shouts. "He's *very* dangerous!"

Still carrying the white Siamese in his arms, Hiram jumps up and walks back a few steps, wondering what the hell he's going to tell the guy. A handsome man, dressed as a knight, unarmed.

"Bobby! Bobby! Why did you have to do that?" the man shakes his head. He's very upset.

"Have we met?" Hiram asks, holding the cat against his chest. The cat has put one paw on each of Hiram's shoulders, rubbing his head against his chin in what looks like a strangely human hug.

"Did you really think I was that creep?" the man sighs like, where are we here? "I am Mat Donohoo!"

Mat?

A slim, athletic man in his late twenties, with a strikingly well chiselled face. Short dark hair. Piercing blue green eyes.

Hiram blurts out, "I'm sorry, I *swear* I didn't force my way in here. The door opened for me!"

"Brother, what's this shit?" Mat frowns, "You mean you just happened to be passing by high-security zone 12, and it just happened you found the door open?"

"No but the cat brought me here! Computer!" Hiram invokes, "Show Mat Donohoo the visuals of the cat's logbook in the last twenty minutes."

Answers the computer, "The information you required is classified."

Mat scratches his head, perplexed. Mindswitching his access codes, he consults the logbook. "I see!" he gives a wry smile, watching Hiram and the cat madly running after each other in the corridors. "So it's real love!" he concludes, immensely amused.

"I'm sorry!"

"All right!" Mat takes Hiram's arm and walks with him through the forest, "Come, let's sit. You look like you're in shock."

"You bet I'm in shock. I've spent the last three years living with this cat, and suddenly I realise he's a real person."

"Curious how he developed a passion for you," Mat nods. "Whenever he was off duty, he VRRed himself to your cabin. I even thought of giving him to you at one stage."

Wave of hope in Hiram's heart. "Could this be an option?"

"No!" Mat's voice is unwavering, "I can't give out the brotherhood's secret weapons for sentimental reasons."

They have arrived in a small clearing with a pond filled with limpid waters. "A magnificent lab you have here!" Hiram exclaims.

"It's not my lab, it's my bedroom," Mat grins. "Now sit down. If you're thirsty, you can drink from the pond."

Hiram sits on the grass, resting his back against a large tree trunk. The cat nestles on his lap, purring like it's the World to Come.

"I can't believe this!" Hiram still hasn't digested the news. "But if he's real, how can he possibly be so intelligent?"

"If you messed with Family Traits, it must be no secret to you that my father did a lot of hacking into the genetic code of cats. Normal cats can be fairly psychic. Henry tried to see how far he could push their abilities. I worked after him in the direction of computer symbiosis. As you must have noticed, when it comes to maruding, this cat is difficult to beat."

"Did you implant hardware into his nervous system?" Hiram asks.

"No, no hardware. A mutation of his central nervous system."

A mutant cat!

"I knew you were a little monster!" Hiram says lovingly, rubbing his finger under the cat's chin, just at the right place.

"No, not a monster," Mat protests. "White is the future of cats! The genetic mutation was moulded on the Siamese archetypal model."

So his name is White. How boring! Except, of course, if the two cats form a pair. Which naturally leads Hiram to ask, "And what about Black?"

"Brother, next time you happen to pop in without warning, make sure you stay away from Black. He's the dark side of the force. Totally wild."

"I thought White was already pretty wild," Hiram says.

"You have no idea! White is trained for defence. Black is a mass destruction weapon, designed to inflict punishment like you'd find difficult to imagine. The day the Rex sends his armada to Saturn, his generals will fall on their knees and pray the Lord had never created cats."

"Are you going to use these weapons to help the Philadelphians?"

"No way. See, Bobby, each time a new weapon is used against the Rex, his scientists find new devices to counteract it. So, seemingly positive moves prove utterly counterproductive five years down the track. Black and White will only be used as a last recourse."

"So we just sit back and let the Philadelphians die, is that it?"

Mat looks into the water of the pond instead of answering. "Who are you going to be working with, over there?" he asks.

"Colonel Philip Serah."

"Wise choice. He'll tell you certain things."

Checking the time with a mindswitch, Hiram realises his shuttle leaves the spaceport in 45 minutes. He could probably find another way to join his squadron, which is presently regrouping on a station around Saturn. But Hiram is not the kind of man to risk missing his destiny by being late.

"I guess I have to give your baby back," he says, caressing the furry mass that's blissfully wallowing on his lap, his two front paws in the air.

Turning to Mat, "If I was staying here, I would have liked to be your friend."

Holding Hiram's Point in the high regions of mathematical sky, Mat gives his farewell, "We shall meet again in the Fields of Peace."

3.4 Intelligence games

The flight deck of a Scalene 296 is a vaulted circular room, seven metres in diameter. When flying, the walls are replaced by VR representation of the RR view around the craft, so it's like floating in space. Surrounded by a 360 degree starry sphere, Hiram is in command in the central gravito-armchair. Szar is his virtual copilot, and therefore sitting in the gravito-armchair on his right. Sitting in the chairs on the left are Eleonor Mazbrouk and Colonel Varga, hand in hand. When together, these two always seem to be flirting. On Szar's right, Shankar Rashi and Harry Lee.

For entertainment, they watched *The Mathematical Harvest of Leonhard Euler*, a breath-taking program in 16 episodes. They had Eleonor tell them all about the latest findings of the Philadelphia 12 Institute of Genetics. And Szar told Archive stories about Eisraim and the counties of the Centre North. Szar has just finished the heart-warming episode at a tirtha-lake, when his guru half-drowned him before giving him his disciple's name. "I think we should stop calling you Bobby," he concludes.

"Agreed!" Varga seconds.

"What do you think? Should I change my name?" Hiram asks.

"No need! Since you've chosen Hiram as your pilot's name, you can just let it be known it's what you want people to call you in all circumstances. It's part of the tradition of the Philadelphian Air Force," Varga explains.

"Just like Elyani did when she joined Philadelphia 12's academy: she became the Panther," Szar adds.

"Do you know how she came up with that name?" Hiram asks.

"It's what Serah used to call her. A long story."

Hiram gives a handclap in excitement, "I can't believe I'll be with these folks in 6 hours."

"5 hours, 32 minutes," virtual navigator Rashi specifies. "It will..."

"Jex B to all pilots!" A communication from Colonel St@kus, the head of Operation Oxygen. "We'll be reaching the blockade in 30 minutes."

If everything goes well, they should not have to fire one missile. The Scalene fighters are coming from high above the plane of the ecliptic, a path never taken by cargo ships. They will therefore hit a part of the blockade that is poorly defended. The Yantra, a Sickle-class Philadelphian battle cruiser, is about to create a diversion 4,000 km away, blowing up three of the blockade's relay sub-stations, while a cargo ship will be simulating a forced entry. The 301 Scalene fighters are to pretend to be on their way to rescue the cargo, then bifurcate at the last moment and penetrate the blockade.

"Do you know where the name Jex B comes from?" Szar says, to divert the tension. "Jex Belaran, the Nephilim Hunters' headquarters in Atlantis. Supercharged Point-intensity, amidst the magnificent landscapes of the Snowy Mountains. It's where Felicia lived."

From what Hiram has gathered, Felicia was a former girlfriend of Szar's. Rather hot-blooded, by the sound of their constant fights.

"Cool! Does Colonel St@kus believe he's the reincarnation of Felicia?"

Szar bursts out laughing. "I wish he were! Felicia in a Scalene fighter... now *that* would make the Rex shiver!"

"Well, maybe St@kus *is* Felicia, after all!" Eleonor Mazbrouk suggests.

"Negative! St@kus was one of the Hunters," Szar says.

"How exciting!" Eleonor rubs her hands. "Did you meet him?"

"No, but we know exactly who he was. Registered in Archive mat..."

"Jex B to all pilots, red alert! An unexpected welcoming party is on its way to meet us. Z-99 fighters. Number yet unknown."

The shit begins.

On the flight deck Rashi conjures up a holographic map. "There!" he points to a cloud of dots at 6 o'clock.

Above the holograph, the Damage Assessment Unit's virtual panel has already appeared. On the left it reads, "Scalene 292: 301 units; casualties: 0." On the right, "Z-99: 21 units; casualties: 0."

"Only 21? Good, good," Varga says. "We're taking them by surprise. Otherwise, there'd be many more."

Hiram's squadron is at the back of the Scalenes' fleet. It's unlikely he'll have to shoot. Still, he asks Szar, "I should be feeling tense, shouldn't I?"

Szar gives his Dragon smile, "Aren't you?"

"No. Can't see what's different between this and a VR engagement."

Szar doesn't answer, just nods, thoughtful.

The enemy dots are moving extraordinarily fast. "ETA: 7 minutes 30 seconds," Rashi announces.

"Red Dwarf to Squadron 14," the commander of Hiram's unit calls. "Engage Point-pairing."

Ascending straight into the Golden Sun.

What's strange about Point-pairing with people you have never seen is that it immediately makes you feel you've known them forever. Not just a oneness – a cosmic agenda, like all of you had planned the rendezvous since the beginning of time.

"ETA: 5 minutes."

And there's also a superior feeling that comes from being in space. RR space, Hiram must admit, *does* feel different from VR simulations. Of course your eyes can't see any difference since the visuals in your craft are VR signals. But your Point experiences a vastness of a superior kind. A breath of infinity.

At 6 o'clock, four squadrons of Scalenes have deployed in octagonal formations.

"ETA: 3 minutes."

Feeling Semper's presence in the Golden Sun. His liquid light that is just like Barkhan Seer's. His love, enveloping Hiram. Perhaps that's what he meant when he said, "We shall meet again in the Fields of Peace."

"ETA: 30 seconds... 15 seconds... 10 seconds... 5 seconds... Engaged!"

Down at 6 o'clock there's a great ball of fire. The DAU panel starts scoring, but it's ugly. The Z-99 casualties stay at 0 while Scalene casualties go, "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19..."

"Shit! What's going on here?" Hiram pulls a face. Why are Jex B's pilots so slow to lock into the Z-99's superastral models?

"22, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34..."

Down there at 6 o'clock, there are balls of fire.

"Should I try to help?"

"You keep your Point out of there!" Szar reminds him of the orders.

The Scalene's casualty count keeps rising fast, "37, 38, 39, 40..." then it begins to slow down, "41, 43, 44, 45...." plateauing at 46. Suddenly it's the turn of the Z-99. There the counter runs even faster, "1, 9, 17, 19, 20, 21."

Just in time! At that rate the 301 Scalene fighters would have been wiped out in less than 5 minutes.

"Jex B to all pilots! The space is completely clear," A perfectly calm voice. "We'll be crossing the blockade in 6 minutes."

Hiram stays silent, Point-paired with his squadron, wondering what it would take to make him feel more tense than during a VR exercise.

If people feel tense, it *must* be because they regard RR as fundamentally different from VR. Hiram can see the logic behind that, but the distinction still hasn't reached through to his autonomic nervous system.

Except of course that 46 knights have just died. What if Penelope had been among them?

And what if the Panther had been among them?

But then... what if, what if... Precisely, RR isn't made of what ifs.

The blockade has become visible in the form of a flat red net, a computer image projected on the space views at the front of the craft.

"We'll reach the net in 60 seconds," Rashi announces. "Look! The opening is starting to appear."

A small hole in the net, gradually growing in size.

"Red Dwarf to squadron 14 – Everything going according to plan. Release the Point-pairing but stay on yellow alarm."

The opening in the net keeps growing. When Hiram's fighter makes its way through the hole, Szar slowly claps his hands.

"Entering Philadelphian space!" Hiram's heart leaps with joy.

"Our 255 fighters have passed!" Rashi reports. "Wait a minute, there's something wrong. The net isn't closing itself behind us."

"Do we give a shit?" Hiram asks.

"I'm afraid we do," Varga says. "It means something is likely to be on our back."

St@kus returns on line, "Jex B to all pilots – Increase to maximum speed. ARCTYC."

On the flight deck, the sudden acceleration can't be felt. The Scalene's inertial dampers are perfectly smooth.

"Red Dwarf to squadron 14 – red alert and Point-pairing resumed."

"Jex B to Apax and Hiram, protected channel. Do you read me?"

Protected channel means no one else can hear.

"Apax to Jex B, positive!"

So Commander Apax is part of this fleet? Hiram didn't even know.

"Hiram to Jex B, reading you fine."

"Jex B to Apax and Hiram. My computer has just released a secret instruction: in case a Big Alfredo is shot at us, I'm supposed to call on you."

"Apax to Jex B. A Big Alfredo, is this what's coming?"

"No, 6 of them."

Unless the Scalenes immediately disperse, 6 Alfredos are more than enough to wipe out the entire fleet of 255 fighters.

Varga pulls a face, like he doesn't like Big Alfredos. But Hiram finds them rather interesting to marude. Same principle as the P-21, a few astute variations. He's studied them in depth when he was on the CSS station around Titan.

On the flight decks of all Scalene fighters, the DAU virtual panels have reappeared. On the left, "Big Alfredos: 6; casualties: 0." On the right, "Scalene 296: 255; Casualties: 0."

"Jex B to Apax and Hiram – what are your recommendations?"

"That's it!" Rashi announces. "I've got the scanners locked on the Alfredos!"

While Apax answers Jex B, Hiram Point-follows the scanner's signal and reaches a nice set of 5D models all joined like a string of hyper-sausages. "Bingo!" he announces.

"Jex B to Hiram, who is Bingo?"

Bingo is a game Sigfr!d and Bobby used to play when they were little, but there's no time to explain. "Hiram to Jex B, I'm holding the model in my Point at this very minute. I will need the combined fire power of 3 fighters." He quickly activates the manoeuvre planner of his computer, drawing a plan of attack in which 3 Scalenes stay at the rear with him and go Bingo on the 6 Alfredos. "QED ARCTYC!" he says, transmitting his plan to Jex B.

Takes less than 10 seconds for St@kus to analyse the plan. Then, "Jex B to Hiram. Plan rejected. My orders state that at least 35% of the Alfredos be allowed to explode and inflict damage."

"Hiram to Jex B. Do you mean we let them kill us, even if we can avoid the slaughter?"

"Jex B to Hiram, repeating: 35% or more of incoming missiles must be left to follow their course."

Hiram disconnects his communication output and turns to Szar, outraged. "What's this nonsense? Are we fighting a war or playing a computer game, here?"

Szar's answer falls sharply, "Don't discuss the order!"

But how can someone have given such a stupid order?

"Move!" Szar shouts.

"All right!" Shame, but more than 35% of 6 is no less than 3. Hiram sends another plan which lets half of the Alfredos move along. "ARCTYC!"

Apax is the first to give his assessment. "Apax to Hiram. Great job!"

Asshole!

"Jex B to Hiram, plan accepted with one modification: twelve other fighters will accompany us and shoot on imaginary targets in space. I'm coming in Blue Whale's squadron. Hiram and Apax, leave your squadrons and join us." Then on a non-protected channel, "Jex B to all pilots. Immediate dispersion. ARCTYC!"

Next image, there are Scalene fighters moving in all directions of space. Looks random but it's a precise computer-driven piece of choreography. A few seconds later, Hiram finds himself moving back towards the net together with 14 other fighters.

"ETA, 60 seconds," Rashi signals.

"Hiram to Jex B, I'm holding the model, shoot as planned, ARCTYC."

As planned, three fighters start concentrating their fire power. Meanwhile, the ten other fighters are shooting randomly, just for fun.

The Alfredos have started dispersing, but too late to escape the Scalene's fire. From high up in a superastral sphere, Hiram is sending a Point-signal

which instantly reflects into the computers of 3 of the Alfredos, confusing them.

There follows a massive explosion which illuminates twenty degrees of space.

On the DAU units "Alfredos: 3; casualties: 3. Scalenes: 255; casualties: 0." But the three other Alfredos are fast closing in at 2 hours, 3 hours and 7 hours. They explode one after the other.

Scenic fireworks.

On the DAUs: "Alfredos: 0; casualties: 6. Scalenes: 202; casualties: 53."

"Oh shit! Shit!" Hiram beats the arm of his chair with his fist. "I can't *believe* this."

"Jex B to all pilots! The net has closed behind us, there's nothing else coming. Resume formation, ARCTYC. Clear space, we're going home!"

"Fucking asshole!" Hiram yells, "How *dare* he speak to them in that fatherly tone when he's just killed fifty-three of them!"

"Jex B to Apax and Hiram, protected channel. All orders you received during this mission are to remain strictly confidential. Both of you are CSS officers, I don't need to tell you more. Understood?"

"Apax to Jex B. Understood Colonel!"

Hiram takes his head in his hands, utterly disgusted.

Szar orders him, "Answer!"

"Hiram to Jex B. Understood."

Fifty-three kids killed for nothing. Volunteers, moreover.

Heavy silence.

"Bobby... I mean, Hiram," Varga inhales a deep breath before continuing, "precisely, we're fighting a war, not playing a computer game."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

It's Harry Lee who answers, "It means that the last thing MS7 wants is to let the Rex know we can dispose of his A^&~-driven hardware like virtual tissues."

"Do you mean we've just sacrificed fifty-three pilots to play some kind of intel game?"

"Yes, it's exactly what I mean. Which is why you'd better keep your mouth shut when we arrive on Mothership 7."

"Fifty-three pilots!" Makes Hiram feel sick.

Varga turns towards him, shining the warmth of his virtual emanation's presence. "I too had to do things like this when I was in command, you know."

"You mean you let people die for nothing?"

"No, not for nothing. Winning the 1st Battle of Mercury required that the Rex be taken completely by surprise. In the months before the battle, I had to sacrifice a number of my pilots. It cost me, let me tell you."

What's in Varga's eyes is so deep that Hiram's anger falls flat.

"And now the 5th Battle of Mercury could begin any day," Lee adds.

Hiram's rendezvous with destiny.

3.5 Sunday 08:07, Welcome to the Philadelphias, brother!

In Philadelphian space, the Scalene fighters separate into six groups, each of them headed for a different station. Hiram and eight other craft are directed to Mothership 7, which is posted only 4 hours away from Philadelphia 6!

MS7 is somewhat of a hybrid between a carrier and a space station. Like a ship, it moves about in space. But with 170,000 personnel, its size is more comparable to that of a space station.

Hiram lands in docking station 1, a 1300-metre-long hangar filled with rows of Scalene fighters of various sizes. While his 296 smoothly glides a few metres above floor level, finding its way to its newly allotted parking spot, Hiram quickly counts, "25 shuttles and... 177 fighters."

"Notice these beasts?" Shankar points to 24 massive fighters at the end of the dock.

"They're the 333 monsters!" Hiram smiles affectionately.

The 333 is the last born of Shankar's family. It's not just its size – 77.9 metres long – that makes it a monster, but its fighting capabilities and its speed. There's nothing faster than a Scalene 333, not even the latest missiles of the Rex.

"Makes you drool, doesn't it?" Lee winks at Shankar.

Shankar winks back, "Makes me feel like reincarnating on the spot!"

"All right, folks!" Hiram gets up from his chair. "Time to say bye bye. Thanks for everything, you've been wonderful, as usual."

To say bye, Eleonor usually gives him a kiss on the cheek. But today she's in AR so she just waves her hand like the other clones.

Hiram walks to the door of his craft, which has just been opened. He looks up to the hangar's ceiling, at least forty metres above his head, and starts walking down the steps.

A female voice hails him, "Bobby?"

He looks down, sees a lovely brunette dressed in the knights' uniform. He misses a step, falls forwards and lands on the floor in a heap, screaming with pain.

"Bobby!" the girl kneels by his side. "Did you hurt yourself?"

What a fucking, fucking stupid question to ask someone who's screaming with pain.

"It's my ankle! Oh! Ho!"

"Computer!" the girl calls, "send us a doctor, emergency class C!" She takes his hand, "I'm Sally P#cal, of alpha-alpha choir Himalayan. I'm your welcoming committee."

Bobby manages to lie down, watches the welcoming committee's beautiful blue eyes. "Ah, well, thanks. I'm Hiram." When he remains perfectly still, the pain becomes a little less.

"You use your pilot's name?"

He nods. "Oh!" Shooting pain again.

"Computer!" she asks, "What's the doctor doing?"

"On his way. ETA 54 seconds." It's a muffled voice, just like in TS5.

"Did you have a good trip?" Sally asks.

"Was all right."

Boy, she's *virtually* beautiful! If she wasn't holding his RR hand, he'd doubt she was real.

"I meant... did any of your friends die during the attacks," she asks.

"No, I didn't have any friends among the pilots."

"That's good!" She sighs in relief and warms him with a smile.

A tall bearded guy dressed in a white softmetal suit arrives, running. Sally explains what has happened. He drops his attache-case-looking portable medi-computer on the floor and starts examining Hiram's leg with a hand-held scanner.

"Just a sprained ankle," he says. "But I'm getting strange readings here. Have you been exposed to large doses of radiation in the last few years?"

"Nope."

The doctor frowns, "I don't know what's happening, I can't access your medical history chip."

A microscopic implant under Hiram's left shoulder blade. All knights carry one.

"What's wrong with it?" Sally asks.

"Oh!" Hiram screams with pain. Another spasm in his ankle.

"Listen Doc, can't you give him a painkiller?" Sally protests.

"Sorry, I must check for possible drug allergies first," the doc is adamant. "His medical history chip won't let me in."

"Just connect your portable to my Scalene! All my records are in the computer," Hiram says.

As soon as the doctor has established the link, his portable announces, "The information you require is classified."

Oh no! CSS fucking nonsense a-gain! When is this going to end?

The doctor scratches his head, "We have an unusual situation here."

Using mindswitches, Hiram quickly enters his CSS clearance access codes. "Try again!"

This time the portable is more specific, "The information you require is level-6 classified. It can only be viewed by authorised personnel."

"A medical history chip that's level-6 classified?" the Dr frowns. "There's got to be some malfunction, here!"

At that moment Hiram realises that his medical history chip must bear the records of all the weird things Mat's cat did to him while he was in hospital. Remembering how traumatised Dr Fawlers was, he prefers to leave the bearded guy out of this.

"Yeah, probably some malfunction. I've just come out of an engagement with Big Alfredo missiles. Three of them blew up within visual range."

"Might explain why your computer's acting strange," the Dr says. "I'll just repair your ankle with my gravito-handlers. For the painkillers, you'll have to wait."

While the gravito-surgery is going on, the portable medicomputer's virtual console sends out bizarre sounds, with red lights flashing like it's doomsday.

"I'm sorry, I'm going to have to transfer you to hospital," the doc says.

"No need!" Helped by Sally, Hiram sits up. "This ankle is already feeling *much* better."

"It's nothing to do with your ankle. I'm picking up multiple readings of deep cellular alterations. I have no idea where from."

"Did I get nuked by the Alfredos?" Hiram pulls a face.

"No, there are no signs of recent irradiation," the doc says. And he turns to his virtual console, requesting, "Send me a wheelchair programmed to take a patient to a bed in Central Hospital unit 44. Emergency class A."

Class A? It's getting worse.

But then the computer replies, "Request denied. Bobby Elmian is to be transferred to the Neurocybernetic Institute."

"What's that?" the tall man doesn't seem to be accustomed to facing contradiction. "Where does this transfer decision come from?"

Muffled voice, "This information is classified."

"All right then! I'd better get out of here," he shrugs his shoulders, noticeably vexed. He asks Sally, "Can you wait for the wheelchair and take this man to the Neurocybernetic Institute?"

"Sure can, Doc. Thanks for everything."

He turns his back and walks away without saying bye.

"How about we start again?" Sally sits on the floor, cross-legged. "I'm Sally P#cal, of alpha-alpha Himalayan. The Black Panther sent me to greet you."

"I'm Hiram. It's my pilot's name."

Half way between two Scalene fighters, in the middle of the gigantic hangar where shuttles and fighters keep moving in and out and hundreds of people are rushing in all directions, they shake hands, "Glad to meet you!"

Her hand is soft, welcoming.

"The Himalayan choir is about to begin a three-week training intensive with the Panther. She wants you to join us."

"Sounds wonderful! How many people in your choir?"

She swallows. "Until one week ago, eight. But last Friday we were ambushed on the outskirts of the infamous stocking. Two of our men died."

Perhaps the most special thing about Szar is the way he sometimes looks you in the eyes and brings down the White peace of the Eagle. Hiram tries to do just that. "I'm... sorry."

From Point to Point there's pairing, as if they were in the shooting ground.

"So your choir is no longer studying?" he asks. Yet Sally doesn't look any older than him.

"We graduated 4 months ago."

Penelope's words come back to mind... the frontline abattoir.

The computer-guided wheelchair has arrived. Sally helps Hiram sit in it. And then it's history repeating itself all over again. Hiram finds himself discovering the corridors of MS7 with a RR girl hurrying by his side, hundreds of

people busying around, and no one else in a wheelchair. The same kind of corridors, except that here all the walls are painted white and nearly half the people are wearing an AR white rose on their lapel.

At the door of the Neurocybernetic Institute, they are received by four security guards dressed in shining white softmetal suits. After checking the bill of delivery in the wheelchair's navigation computer they tell Sally, "Sorry, you can't come in."

The young woman puts her delicate hand on Hiram's shoulder. "Call me when you get out of here. The Himalayans are anxious to meet you."

"Thanks for the welcome, brother!" Hiram smiles.

A guard accompanies Hiram's wheelchair through a network of corridors.

"Ah shit!" Hiram exclaims. "I forgot to speak to the customs officers."

The guard raises his eyebrow. "What sort of items did you bring with you, sir?" he asks in his professional voice, like he doesn't want to show it but he's ready to arrest Hiram on the spot if needed.

"My duvet and my pillow are made of GG337 feathers."

The guard stifles a smile, "I wouldn't worry about it."

Hiram does worry. Regulations make him anxious, it's his character.

They reach a small room with a single gravito-field in the middle. Before leaving, the guard asks Hiram to wait here.

"Hello Bobby, I'm Dr Patricia Elchevarra. You can call me P@."

Making his wheelchair turn around, Hiram discovers a teenage girl dressed in white like a doctor. At first sight, she's normally ugly, like normal RR people are. But there's something special about her – her Point. It comes as a shock. The only time Hiram has met anything remotely like it was with Mat's cat.

"I use my pilot's name, Hiram."

"Hi, Hiram," she smiles at him like she knows he's Point-scanning her and he's welcome to do that. But as it drags on she gets impatient, "All right, can I get dressed, now?"

"Uh..." Intimidated, Hiram politely withdraws from her Point.

"Lie down in the gravito-field!"

He moves his wheelchair close to the gravito-field and lets himself fall into it.

"Now let me see about this terminal disease!" she smiles like it sounds really funny.

Terminal disease, is this what the bearded asshole has diagnosed? Hiram gulps. He doesn't find it funny at all. He's got to liberate Philadelphia 6, you see. Can't afford a terminal disease. As the girl starts running a hand-held scanner over his body, he questions, "Uh... what kind of doctor are you?"

"Medicine, genetics and neurocybernetics," she answers without looking at him, busy scanning his vital functions.

"That's a lot of doctorates!" She's got a fascinating Point but on closer examination she's much more ugly than normal RR people. Far too skinny, yellowish skin, a ridiculous ponytail that makes her look even younger than she is.

Her fast movements and quirky voice intonations are strangely evocative of a mouse.

"All perfectly like it should be," she announces.

Sigh of relief. So there is hope for Philadelphia 6.

P@ comes by his side, grabs his right hand with her right hand, squeezes it to breaking limit, bends down close to his face. "Welcome to the Philadelphias, brother!"

Strong breath, like she had garlic for breakfast.

"Uh... are you a knight?" he asks.

"No."

Then why does she call him brother?

She frowns and moves back, making the air breathable again, "I don't need to tell you that you have received certain... 'unusual' treatments, do I?"

"No, I'm aware of the fact," he says. Sweet Lord, but what has Mat's cat done to him, exactly?

"Right. Now listen, I can't reprogram your medical history chip to normalise it. Too dangerous. If you were to fall into a coma or something, the medics need to be able to know. But I'm going to allocate you with a secret access code to cover routine situations. In case of problems, you don't have to take *any* shit from *anyone*. Just mindswitch the code, and everything will be fine. The code is #333OLLOPA. Get it?"

"Yes."

"No you're not getting it but doesn't matter, it'll work anyway." Quick mischievous smile. "Now get out of here! The world is yours."

3.6 Sunday 11:31, Urgent mail

Dr Patricia Elchevarra has programmed Hiram's wheelchair to take him to his quarters. After a ten minute drive, Hiram arrives at a 3 by 3 cabin where his mattress, duvet and pillow have been transferred.

The exact replica of the cabin he had on Titan. Except that he is greeted by a gorgeous AR blonde woman dressed as a knight, with a white rose attached to her chest, "TOP brother, I am Math!lda, the orientation officer of KV7, the knights' VR network on MS7."

"TOP!" he hardly looks at her, busy transferring himself from his wheelchair into his gravito-field. Same type as those on TS5.

"Hiram, there's some priority mail waiting for you in your mail box. Would you like me to broadcast it for you?" Math!lda offers.

"Sorry I really don't have time I'll see you later bye," he disconnects the sweet Math!lda. "Computer, install Multi-V!"

The muffled voice, "Multi-V's communication protocols are incompatible with KV7's network. The program can't be installed."

"Ah, shit!" That's because Multi-V is written in A^&~. It probably won't require more than minor adjustments, but there are more pressing matters.

Hiram lies in the gravito-field and calls Dr Mazbrouk. "Eleonor, help! I'm in big trouble!"

"Already? Didn't take you long!" the fat middle aged woman makes her virtual entry. "Tell me darling, what's happening?"

"In docking station 1, a doctor diagnosed me with fatal disease. He said my cellular levels are all over the place, it's been going on for years. I need a complete, no-nonsense check-up. In your RR life, you were a medical doctor as well as a geneticist, weren't you?"

"Yeah but that doesn't make any difference. Being a clone, I can be a doctor of anything I want," she reminds him.

Of course. Hiram is in shock, "Please, Eleonor! I can't afford to die. Virginia *needs* me! If something is wrong with my health I need to know immediately."

"Darling, darling... gentle!" she switches him onto VRR, sits by his side in the gravito field and puts her warm, pacifying hand on his chest. "We're going to run a full battery of tests. Right now," she says, setting the medicomputer in action. Some of the tests are more than just readings, they require analysis from MS7's central pathology lab. To entertain him while waiting for the results she tells him, "Do you realise that now we are here, we could get VR recordings of five-year old Virginia. It would reduce our models by at least half. We might even be able to go down below 10^6 Virginias."

"I'd never dare ask the Panther for VR recordings!"

"Don't be silly!" Eleonor rubs her nose at the juncture of her spectacles. "I think you should tell her *everything*. I bet she'd be flattered to know someone is so passionately in love with her daughter. Do you realise how romantic all this is? A young mathematician who goes as far as inventing revolutionary new hyperalgorithms just to get an elusive glimpse of the woman he loves. Oh!" she shakes her head, a shiver running down her virtual back. "I wish this could have happened to me!"

"You're sweet," he smiles, taking her hand.

"If you tell the Panther everything, she might even want to give you a piece of hair."

"Ah, a piece of hair!" Hiram sighs with nostalgia.

A piece of hair would give him a full reading of the Panther's chromosomes, and then, then if the Golden Sun was with him – which it is, for ever and ever – he could perhaps even be lucky enough to sneak one of Philip Serah's hair too. Then, then, having the chromosomes of the papa and the mama, if there was any chance in the galaxy he could get VR recordings of little Virginia (which he could never possibly ask for, but with a solid mathacker's technique many a dream can come true) then, then... Then Virginia would be his! With the hypersynchronic rewriting of Family Traits he has concocted, phenotypes could be reduced to less than 100 computer models. Perhaps even less, but he won't be able to know until he has the chromosomes in hand.

Hiram takes off into his favourite fantasy. He has just landed on Philadelphia 6 and he is discovering a beautiful Virginia, just like #11,867,461.

His first words to her, "You are *just* like I thought you were!"

That's what he wants his first words to be. It will be a combined triumph of love and mathematics – Revelation Sky on Philadelphia 6.

Virginia, I love you!

You are my blood, my life. I would – and I will – kill for you!

Virginia, wait for me, I am on my way. Now that I have overcome the filth of the Rex, nothing will stop me. Nothing!

"All the tests are normal!" Eleonor interrupts the reverie. "Your biorhythms are slightly upset due to jetlag but that doesn't count. Your pancreatic readings are superb. Your 992 blood parameters are smiling like a spring morning. Your ankle is fully repaired. There's nothing wrong anywhere, just a bit of staphylococci in your nostrils but that, I warned you many times, is what happens to people who pick their nose."

"And what about my chromosomic material?"

"Your chromosomes are fine, darling."

"So I'm not going to die?"

Eleonor shakes her head, "You're going to live a long, happy life. Remember I intend to be the godmother of your first baby with Virginia."

"Promise. But then what was this nonsense? How could that doctor's readings be so disturbed when everything is normal with me?"

"A prank of Mat's cat?" Eleonor hypothesises. "Some kind of time bomb he would have left in your medical history chip, just for fun."

"My cat?" Hiram smiles affectionately. "Wouldn't be out of character. Maybe it's his way of making sure I remember him."

In which case there is probably much more to look forward to.

"Still, there's something that doesn't work out, here!" Hiram cogitates. "In docking station 1, that doctor found abnormal readings *before* he tried to plug into my medical history chip."

"Are you sure?" Eleonor questions. "Anyhow, the cat would have programmed the chip to mathack any medicomputer that comes near you."

"Quite likely," Hiram grins. The cat had always shown a sense for details. And a marked tendency to victimise medical personnel.

A VR communication comes through, "Hiram, we want to see you!"

Four buoyant young women dressed in knights' suits have appeared in the cabin, Sally among them.

"Why don't you come and join us? We're at No Limits," the tallest of the girls invites him.

"He can't, he hasn't graduated yet," Sally intervenes.

"Doesn't matter. Just marry me and they'll let you in!" the tall girl says.

"Gwen!" the other three shout in reprobation.

"You're the Himalayan choir, is that it?" Hiram asks.

"The choir's female wing!" the girl on the left says. "Why don't you meet us at Ganapati's? It's the best Indian restaurant in the Philadelphias. We invite you."

"Uh..." Hiram hesitates. He'd love to meet them but he hates the idea of having to tell them that 97% of his nutrition still comes from the proto-puree

pumped into his stomach four times a day by the medicomputer. He's never eaten a meal from a restaurant.

Actually he's never been to a restaurant. Penelope often tried to take him out but he never had time, he had to finish his bomb's model.

Eleonor has already guessed what's troubling him. Through VR signals which the girls can't hear, she whispers, "You'll be fine, don't worry! I have a plan."

Hiram trusts her. Unconditionally. "All right! When shall I meet you there?" he asks the girls.

"Ten minutes!" EOC.

Hiram turns to Eleonor, "Now, how am I going to get out of this meal?"

"Easy, darling! I checked Ganapati's menu through the network's restaurant hotline. Just order a rose lhassi (it's liquid) and a couple of rashagullas. You shouldn't have too much of a problem swallowing the rashagullas if you chew them well. And if your friends ask you why you're not eating more, just say your stomach is upset from jetlag, which is the pure truth."

He takes her in his arms. "Eleonor, Eleonor! Who could dream of a more fantastic mother than you?"

She answers with a noisy peck on each cheek. As he gets into his wheelchair, she reminds him, "Rose lhassi, a couple of rashagullas."

"Rose lhassi, a couple of rashagullas," he practises the words.

Fresh-faced and smiling, Math!lda forces her way on line, "Sure you don't want to look at your mail?"

Without Multi-V, it would take ages.

"Is it from Penelope Heinzel?"

"No, it's from..."

"No time. I'll look at it when I come back."

3.7 Sunday 12:45, Discoveries

Ganapati's is a small crowded restaurant. It smells like food. People sit around tables, order from a small RR guy who looks a bit like Shankar Rashi and wears a ludicrous white turban on his head. While they wait for the food, they seem to be having a great time. Hiram wonders why, he hates waiting. Waiting is for the moderate. He hates moderation. As he waits for his friends, he can't avoid thinking he was right to resist all of Penelope's tactics to drag him out of the 5D model of his P-21. Making love in the bomb was much more fun than waiting for food at restaurants. Specially knowing he hates eating. It's too slow, he can't see the point. At least the proto-puree pump doesn't waste his time. It slips into his oesophagus while he's asleep, or so busy in some VR that he doesn't even notice it.

"TOP Hiram!" Behind him, Sally surprises him by putting her hand on his shoulder. She introduces, "Gwen, Edith, Kuan Y!n."

TOPs are exchanged and the brethren sit at the table. They have to squeeze against each other because Hiram's wheelchair is taking up all the space. While they're taking position, he notices with a degree of reassurance that the three others are nowhere as pretty as Sally. Just as well! Knowing how ugly Hiram

finds himself, it would be embarrassing to have to work with a bunch of genetic anomalies like her.

"We owe you an apology, we should never have sent Sally as the welcoming committee!" Kuan Y!n begins. She's an Asian girl with a round face and short black hair. She wears colourful fractal make-up on her eyelids.

"We expected you to fall for her, but certainly not as dramatically!" Edith grins. There's a strange melange of softness and strength in her eyes, years of war written on her face. The maturity of someone who's gone through abysmal shit and survived. Hiram instantly likes her.

The girls spend a few minutes inquiring about Hiram's journey then it's grill time. "Come on, mysterious man, tell us all about you!" Kuan Y!n feigns a seductress' smile.

"Why mysterious man?" Hiram asks.

They burst out laughing, as if he had cracked an excellent joke.

"Haven't you read what the knights' directory says about you?" Sally asks, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"No, what's it say?"

Edith recites, "Bobby Elmian, born in Hyper Earth Link, date unknown, parents unknown. There are no details on how you escaped. Then it says you studied at TS5, majoring in maths, computing *and* genetics! *All* assignment topics are classified. Completed a PhD in maths, the topic of which is classified. Has just been awarded a PhD in genetics by Philadelphia 12 academy, the topic of which is also classified. Maruding score, classified..."

"But that's complete nonsense!" Hiram can't believe his ears.

"Tell us, what's your maruding score?" Gwen asks.

Hiram still doesn't have one. "That I can't tell you!"

Gwen and Kuan Y!n burst out laughing again, clapping their hands.

"And what about your factory of mutant lobsters?" Kuan Y!n goes on. "We find the mutant lobsters *particularly* fascinating."

As Hiram remains silent, Edith winks at him, "I'm afraid the mutant lobsters have managed to find their way into your biography, despite CSS censorship."

That's it! The CSS has struck again. Or perhaps it's the cat who's made a mess of every single database mentioning Bobby Elmian. In either case, the legacy is going to be heavy.

Hiram makes his face vague, breathes deeply, thinks of the White Eagle.

Embarrassed silence, a mutual sense of blunder floating in the air.

"Hello Gwen! Hello Sally! Hello Edith! Hello Kuan Y!n! Hello sir, how are you today? What can I offer you for lunch?" the RR waiter hands them menus.

Hiram doesn't bother picking one up, "I'll have rose lhassi and a couple of rashagullas."

"Is that all, sir?"

"My stomach is a bit upset. Must be jetlag."

While the girls are reading the menus, the waiter engages in a conversation, "Where did you take off?"

"Titan."

"You mean you're one of the volunteer pilots who's just crossed the blockade?"

"T's right."

A Golden-Sun-warm smile illumines the small man's tanned face, "Welcome to the Philadelphias, friend," he puts his left hand on Hiram's shoulder and extends the right one, "I'm Ganapatidass."

"Hiram."

They shake hands and Ganapatidass starts speaking to him like he's his best friend, personally thanking him for having come, telling him how much he appreciates his act of courage, inquiring if any of his friends got killed. When he learns none did, he claps his hands, celebrating, "Gang Gang Gana! Hiram, today is my shout, you can order anything you want. What else would you like?"

As Ganapatidass insists, Hiram settles for 1.5 rose lhassi and 3 rashagullas (2.5 rashagullas didn't work out).

When they finish ordering, Hiram is left with a special feeling in his heart. A superior sense of being cared for by the universe. Hard to put into words, but rich in meaning.

"There's something about the Philadelphias!" he tells his friends.

"You'll find many people like him around here," Edith nods.

"Blessed is the land where men have heart!" Hiram remembers one of Amy's favourite lines.

A flash in Edith's eyes, like she too is a fan of Maitreya's poems.

The flow of empathy restored, the conversation resumes, this time limited to trivia ranging from Titan's mists to MS7's hairdressers. The food finally arrives. What the girls have ordered looks disgusting, smells disgusting but – thanks Eleonor! – the rose lhassi appears to pose no major threat. And Ganapatidass has forgotten about the rashagullas. Drifting from topic to topic, the conversation swings to the latest war news.

"Have you heard that the infamous stocking has started swelling?" Gwen mentions.

"What?" Hiram is shocked he missed such an essential piece of news.

"It's happened in the last 24 hours, while you were travelling. The corridor of P-21s linking Philadelphia 6 to the blockade has doubled in width. There is a massive fleet on its way from Hyper-Earth Link. More than 7,000 ships! They are expected to reach the stocking in less than five days."

"Friday 03:06," Sally adds.

So the beginning of the 5th battle of Mercury *is* imminent.

ETA 109.3 hours, Hiram quickly calculates.

"The Rex's fighters are making more and more reconnaissance sorties out of the stocking," Kuan Y!n says.

That, Hiram is well aware of. More than sixty sorties in the last month, mainly Z-99 fighters, a few Z-101s. No battle cruisers, and no missiles – so far.

"It's how our friends got shot," Sally explains. "We and four other choirs were flying two hours away from Philadelphia 6 when we were chased by a cloud of Z-101s."

"Last Friday? Yes, I followed that," Hiram recalls, "So it was you? You did *remarkably* well. Alpha-alpha standards!" he says with sincere admiration. A 7-minute engagement during which 17 enemy fighters were destroyed, with only 4 Scalene casualties.

Edith lets her spoon fall into her plate and bursts into tears.

Kuan Y!n immediately takes her in her arms.

Hiram bites his lip, watching Edith who's cracking up, crying a flood of tears.

Sally puts her hand on Hiram's shoulder. It seems to be a Philadelphian custom. "Did any of your friends die in combat?" she asks.

"No, not yet."

"We've lost... quite a few in the last year," she says.

"Too many!" Edith sobs. "Too many!"

Hiram drifts into recollections of the battle in which Sigfr!d destroyed 97% of the population of the solar system. So painless! At the same time, a flash-back of the DAUs, only a few hours ago, "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 37, 38, 39..."

"Listen, I'm afraid we've lost our appetite. Do you mind if we don't wait for your dessert?" Gwen asks.

"Of course not."

After a quick bye they disperse.

"Call us if you need someone to talk to!" Sally tells Hiram as his wheelchair starts rolling.

Ganapatidass catches Hiram on the way out, "Wait! Your rashagullas!"

Hiram tries to say he'll come back to eat them another time but Ganapatidass insists on giving him a takeaway box filled with a dozen spongy white balls floating in cluttered syrupy juice.

He puts his hand on Hiram's shoulder, "Next time you come, you can have your free lunch. Be well, my friend."

3.8 Sunday 14:22 (ETA 108.7 hours) More discoveries

"Listen, there's some heavy shit happening," Hiram tells Eleonor on his return to the cabin. "I gotta watch the news." He throws the takeaway box into his gravito-field. The rubbish nano-shredder takes care of it, making it disappear instantly and without a noise.

"The news can wait!" Eleonor is in a jubilant mood. "I checked the mail for you. I want you to go through it immediately!" Her tone leaves no room for discussion.

Hiram smiles, amused. "Yes Mom!"

It's what he says when he wants to tease her for being too bossy.

"Math!lda," he invokes. "My mail!"

The first VR message begins, showing a large warehouse filled with piles of small containers. There's a huge oval sign painted on the back wall, it reads,

"Succulent Lobsters." There's a subtitle, "Seafood will never be the same!" The visuals are accompanied by triumphant fanfare music.

When the music fades, a virtual panel filled with columns of figures appears. There's also a tall, thin young guy with a huge nose and a shaven head. "Dear partner," the guy begins, "as you can immediately see from the glorious left column on the spreadsheet, our sales have kept rocketing over the last few weeks. The orders are out of control! I'm about to buy the premises next door. We need to expand our production capabilities..."

"But what's this nonsense?" Hiram fast-forwards the VR, which shows a factory filled with gigantic aquariums. "Can you summarise for me?" he asks Eleonor.

"There are 14.7 million lobsters in there, and 49% of them are yours!" she announces with undisguised motherly pride. "Your partner Luke – a real gentleman this Luke, very honest – is even considering starting a franchise of seafood restaurants. Now watch the next message!"

The aquariums disappear, replaced by a small bald man in his fifties, dressed in the dark-grey uniform of a CSS officer, "TOP Elmian, I'm Commander Novalis, CSS liaison officer on MS7. Welcome to the Philadelphias! We have a few surprises for you. You'll be happy to know Colonel Fr#zer was immensely pleased with your work. To reward you, he insisted we speed up the formalities for your degrees: BSc with Honours, majoring in mathematics, computing and genetics, and a PhD in mathematics for your reworking of Simon's theory of hypersynchronicity. Well deserved, I must say," he claps his hands.

"Yeah!" Eleonor joins in, clapping her hands to celebrate.

"The CSS didn't want you to arrive here like a miserable undergraduate. We care for our people!" Novalis gives a protector's smile with teeth.

So it was not the cat.

Hiram is disappointed. But he likes the idea of being a doctor of mathematics. "Ah, well... thanks, Commander!"

"You're welcome!" the protector's smile broadens. More teeth.

It's one of those smart pre-recorded messages to which you can ask questions. "But I thought I had sent my resignation to Colonel Fr#zer!"

"Colonel Fr#zer has rejected your resignation. Think twice, Bobby! So many benefits: paid 10,000 credits per month (in addition to your 1,967.25 credit salary from the Philadelphian Air Force), access to classified intelligence and *any* lab facility you want. And we'll make sure your mail crosses the blockade without delay, which will be handy for your lobster factory. All we're asking from you is to keep us informed of your findings, and solve a few equations for us from time to time."

"He's right," Eleonor seems to agree. "For that kind of money you should think twice!"

"Before making your final decision, why don't you take advice from your superior, Colonel Serah?" Novalis suggests. "He'll..."

"All right, Commander, I'll let you know," Hiram switches him off. "Now what the fuck is that lobster factory?"

Eleonor's eyes are shining with excitement, "Wait! Wait! Watch the next message first."

In the next VR message a very distinguished grey-haired man greets him, "Hello Bobby Elmian, welcome to the Philadelphias. I am Dr Henry Donohoo of the Philadelphia 12 Institute of Genetics. Three weeks ago, my collaborators and I received the enhanced version of Family Traits, with all the extensions you wrote. We have found it remarkable."

Hiram bursts out laughing. Talk about a prank!

It's not a smart message so Henry doesn't stop, "...and your hyperalgorithms, in particular, have arrived just in time to solve a few sticky problems against which we were battling in another project..."

Hiram interrupts the message. "Can you summarise?"

"They're so thrilled with our work that they've given us a PhD in genetics for it!" Eleonor shivers with excitement.

"It certainly owes a lot to you!" Hiram pats her shoulder, but his hand passes through her because she's in AR. He had forgotten. From there he goes straight to the knights' directory. After mentioning his degrees, his biography says, "Co-owner of the Succulent Lobsters factory, located in industrial station B-14 Around Neptune. Succulent Lobsters produces genetically engineered crustaceans with fine taste."

"But where does that come from?" Hiram scratches his head. "Is it the cat?"

"I've investigated. The man to talk to is Elias Sharamollon!" Eleonor gives him a clue.

The virtual accountant! Hiram invokes him immediately.

Elias Sharamollon is a small man in his mid fifties with a hu-u-uge belly-pouch. He is dressed in an impeccable black business suit. Greasy skin, pock-marked. Dark oily hair flattened on his head. Greasy smile, more like a grin fixed on his lips in some kind of rictus. He wears rings with precious stones on the index, major and annular fingers of each hand. "Hello Bobby, how are you my boy? Glad to meet you after all these months."

A greasy voice.

"My name is Hiram now."

"Pilot Hiram? Very good, my boy. How is your health?"

"Much better, thank you. I think it's time you told me about my finances."

Elias' black beady eyes flare. "Oh, you're gonna like it!" he announces with great enthusiasm. He pulls two long brown sticks out of his inner pocket. "Wanna join me in VRR so we can celebrate with a cigar?"

Unsure, Hiram turns to Eleonor, who shakes her head in disgust.

"No thanks."

"All right," Elias puts a cigar back in his pocket. "My boy," he lights the other cigar with his pocket-laser, spreading foul-smelling whisks of AR smoke through the cabin, "I have worked special hard for you. And I'll tell you why: it's because you deserved it. No, you really did," he nods.

"Ah?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, very much so." More smoke. "See, normally when kids join the academy, they've never had any cash in their pocket. And they think they gonna die soon, which ain't that false in many cases, but which leads them to burn their money like it's Christmas shopping every morning. So frustrating for me!" he shakes his head in reprobation, "I can never invest for them in anything solid. But with you!" he raises his hand, "With you, I immediately detected a superior sense of saving. After one year, you still hadn't spent *one* cent of your account. I told myself, 'Elias, this boy *really* wants money!' I like people who *really* want money. No, I do," he nods with conviction. "So I decided I'd go out of my way and play it hard on the short term money market for you. In the Outer Planets, there's so much oppor-*too*nity! As you must remember from the monthly reports I sent you, after only 2 years we already had a portfolio worth a solid 120,000 credits."

Hiram never bothered looking at these records. "And so?"

"And so after two years, there came a *unique* opportoonity! A geek from the Neptune stations was looking for a partner to start a seafood production business. He wanted someone real straight, and someone with a solid background in genetics who could help him in case the mutation of his lobsters got out of hand. Which is why he contacted me at TS5."

Eleonor is smiling like today she's the queen and Varga has just asked her hand in marriage.

"Checking your records," Elias pursues, "I saw you had outstanding marks in genetics, so I told the guy, 'Luke, I have *exactly* the man for you! No, he is!' He trusted me, of course. But then we had a little problem. Luke needed 250,000, which wasn't much, considering he gave you 49% equity, but still too much for you. So I took the risk. I borrowed 130,000 in your name. We *had* to do it, it was such a unique oppor-toonity! See, my boy, in the Outer Planets, seafood's very big! And mutant lobster, I immediately intuited, is the future of seafood," Elias raises his index prophetically.

Eleonor nods, like she couldn't agree more.

"I came to ask your permission before taking on the loan, but you were in hospital at the time. They told me you were dying, so I rushed to get the loan approved before the Trans-Saturnian Bank Cartel found out," oily grin.

Wave of anxiety. "Do I still owe money?" Hiram asks.

"You, owe money? Ha!" Elias bursts out laughing, projecting a spray of AR saliva micro-droplets. "No! Not a credit! All repaid!"

Hiram switches him off and asks Eleonor, "Can you summarise the rest, please?"

"The sales took off immediately. Six months later, from the asteroid belt to Pluto everyone was eating your lobsters. Now all debts are repaid, Succulent Lobsters is worth at least five million credits, and there's half a million cash in your account."

"So the cat had nothing to do with this either!" Thoughtful, Hiram lies in his gravito-field, comes out of it in VRR, gives Eleonor a hug, "I miss my cat, you know."

3.9 Sunday 15:30 (ETA 107.6 hours) Not a reunion

In a way it's not a reunion. They have never RR-met before.

More like a discovery.

The first time they can spend so much time face to face.

Which is kind of scary, in a way. What if she didn't like him?

And what if she wasn't like he thinks she is? After all, last time he spoke to her, he hadn't yet had his mathematical revelation.

She has changed. A bit. The war is taking its toll on the exquisite perfection of her face. The two small vertical lines which start from each side of the top of her nose have burrowed, you can see them even when she doesn't frown. There are also three other lines, horizontal, which have started appearing on her forehead, and one on each cheek. She's 35 years and 7 months old. Having graduated as a knight at 17, she's gone through 18 years of war.

How many engagements did she survive? How many times did she sit in front of a DAU panel, watching fast-changing digits, wondering which of her friends were part of the casualty count? Eighteen years of war are bound to take a toll on a woman, even if she's a goddess.

Yet there is something wild about her. She *is* the Panther. There's Pantherness running through every fibre of her being. It's in the velvet of her black hair, in the feline way she moves, in her stillness when she listens, in the untamed glow of her eyes. Hiram finds her splendid. Her beauty is fierce, undaunted. The perfection of an archetype that shines regardless of the mess of the world, regardless of the Rex's black muck slowly spreading throughout the solar system, regardless of the war that has stolen her daughter and killed most of her friends.

Hiram doesn't feel like talking, just wants to drink in her presence, thanking the mathematical sky for distilling such precious nectar of reunion. When he was with her before, he held a child-like fascination for her. Now he is still in awe of her, but there's also a profound oneness rooted in the Golden Sun. The brotherhood of the World to Come.

Strange, but sitting in front of her in her 3 by 3 office at the Neurocybernetic Institute, looking her in the eyes, Hiram has the uncanny feeling that Virginia is with them. Perhaps the Panther, great magician, has woven hidden strings to Virginia's heart – a four-dimensional bridge through which love flows unhampered. Or is it because Szar's presence is in the room, as if his clone was sitting with them?

Pinch in Hiram's heart. Szar is his best friend, his companion. Virginia is his life, his blood. He would – and he will! – kill for her. The Panther is the most magnificence creature he has ever contemplated, his constant source of inspiration. But the Panther doesn't know any of this! To her, he must be nothing more than a stranger.

That hurts.

Detecting his confusion, she breaks the long silence, "Will you tell me why you have conducted so much research on Philadelphia 6 and the P-21s?"

Lightning-struck. Paralysed. Even if he wanted to speak, he couldn't.

Calling on Virginia for help.

An intrigued smile on the Panther's face.

So she doesn't have a *clue* how much he loves her! To her, he's just a name lost in a long list of students. An ugly little magard miraculously rescued from the dead.

"Anyhow..." she goes on, "Dr Elmian is the star of the day. Just when the infamous stocking starts swelling, here you come, bringing with you the P-21's instruction notice, together with a full manual of A^&~ programming! Admiral Lavash and High Command want to see you as soon as you finish debriefing with Serah, who will be back from Philadelphia 12 tomorrow."

Oh it's so cruel to hear her call him Dr Elmian!

But now he *has* to find something to say, otherwise she might cut the meeting short. Asking for a piece of hair at this stage is clearly out of the question. "Does this mean I will not be training with you?" he asks, then quickly adds, "...Commander?"

"Yes you will. Commencing this evening. I have enrolled you in a training intensive with a choir of top guns. High Command wants you to become fully conversant with the flight and maruding techniques of the Philadelphian Air Force."

With his peripheral vision, Hiram is scanning the Panther's desk, the visible part of her armchair, the other armchair, the floor, the couch on the left, looking for a stray piece of hair.

"What's worrying you, Bobby?" she asks.

At last, no more doctor! The name falls like fresh rain on drought-stricken land.

"I wish to be called by my pilot's name, Hiram. If it's all right with you, Commander."

"Yes, Hiram!" she playfully hammers the name. "Now will you tell me what's wrong with you? Are you worried about saying too much due to your affiliation to the CSS?"

"No, not at all! My allegiance is with you, totally. I mean the Philadelphia Air Force. I can resign from the CSS immediately."

"Don't! It's an advantage for us to have CSS people in our team. It smooths the communication with Outer Planets Alliance. Anyhow, with regard to your particular topics of expertise, the Order of the Knights and the CSS exchange every single bit of information they can put their hands on."

Which immediately makes Hiram wonder which topics the knights hide from the CSS's greedy hands.

"Does this mean I can speak freely to the knights of the Himalayan choir?"

She raises her eyebrow, "Oh no! In the Philadelphias, your topics of expertise are classified level 6 too! So it's like this: the knights have an absolute rule, they *never* lie to each other. I have therefore informed the Himalayan choir that you work for the CSS. They might tease you at times, but they will never ask you about classified information. If a conversation comes to a topic you can't speak about, say just that: 'I can't talk about it!' They'll understand, they won't

insist. Which brings me to the next topic. From the information I received from Dr Donohoo, it wasn't completely clear if he had explained the full details of the treatments he gave you."

"Dr Donohoo? But I never met him."

She frowns, "You never met Mat Donohoo?"

"Oh, Mat? Sorry, I thought you meant *Henry* Donohoo. Of course I know Mat," he grins. "I know some weird things happened to me while I was in hospital, but I'm not sure exactly what."

The Panther bites her lip, like there is something she doesn't like.

It comes as a shock: when she bites her lip she is so much like Szar! And the compassion that shines through her Point is so much like the one that shines through Szar's eyes. Deeply moving.

She picks up his emotion, gives another intrigued smile.

Liquid blueness, infinities in all directions. Virginia's smile.

There follows another long, long silence, during which she looks into him with her full Panther's intensity, reading him. Then she tells him, "Hiram is a beautiful name. It suits you perfectly. Dismissed."

Said with the World to Come in her smile.

Illuminated, Hiram springs up, stands straight to salute her. "Thank you, Commander."

After crossing the doorway he walks two steps then turns round and quickly whispers, "I missed you, you know!"

"Coward!" he tells himself. "You'd never dare say this to her if the door wasn't closed, would you?"

A loud whistle makes him turn his head.

It's P@, the scruffy schoolgirl with three doctorates. From the other end of the corridor, she's making a 'come this way' gesture with her index finger.

Now that Hiram has two doctorates of his own, he feels much less intimidated by her. "My ankle is fine," he tells her. "See! I can walk perfectly now."

She looks to the ceiling and sighs, like this young man is completely missing the point. Then, "Are you coming or do I have to use strength to get you into my office?"

A security guard is passing by. He looks at Hiram and stifles a smile.

"I'm coming!"

Dr Patricia Elchevarra's office is an interesting chaos, not unlike Penelope's bedroom but with pieces of scientific equipment instead of dirty clothes. The walls are covered in shelves with cages. Hiram quickly counts a total of 137 mice.

"Lie down in the gravito-field!" she points to a small medical bed.

"Yes doctor!" he says, not hiding how aggravating he finds her.

She ignores the comment and starts a series of readings with a hand-held scanner. At least today she hasn't had garlic. And her bleached hair is not tied in that ridiculous ponytail.

"Going fine, brother! Going fine!" she squeaks, her eyes fixed on the scanner.

"What does that mean?"

"No gross aberrations, no major discrepancies from one cellular group to the other. Except in the central nervous system of course. But that's how it always happens with hypercerebral nuts like you."

"What?"

She still doesn't look at him, only at the readings, "No offence, darling! I'm just telling you your chromosomes are beautiful."

Perplexed, distressed, Hiram closes his eyes.

"Have you figured out the code I gave you?" she asks.

"#333OLLOPA. What's to figure out about it?" he asks.

"Oh, come on! You can't be that thick. I thought you were a big boy with...'

"P@, please!" he sits up, calls onto the light of World to Come, speaks from his heart, "Please don't play games with me."

Startled, P@ stops her examination to look at him.

She's no longer an arrogant brat, she's a magnificent Point ablaze with Revelation Sky. "You... you have no idea what's happening in your body, do you?" she says.

"No, P@, I have no idea."

"Oh shit! Shit! But you're a knight! You're supposed to know. Knights don't play riddles with each other."

"Fine. So let's stop the riddle. What's going on in my body?"

She looks at him, genuinely dismayed, shaking her head, "I'm sorry. I can't answer! Who is your superior?"

"Colonel Philip Serah."

"You'll have to speak to him."

3.10 Sunday 16:45 (ETA 106.3 hours)

Back in the cabin, Math!lda announces "There's some mail for you!"

Multi-V is now up and running. Hiram's virtual programmers have fixed the code.

Hiram goes fully virtual. "Play mail on channel 3!" he orders while calling Eleonor on channel 1, watching the news on channel 27 and invoking a batch of 180 Virginias onto channels 6 to 9.

His Point geared on channel 3, he watches a smiling Kuan Y!n "Hello, mutant lobster! Just to remind you our training starts at 18:30, shooting ground 47, level 19. See you there." On channel 27 he gets the first visuals of the huge fleet on its way from Hyper-Earth Link. All carriers stationed around Mars have joined in. By the time they arrive in Philadelphian space, there will be more than 9,000 ships. ETA: 106 hours. The Outer Planets are sending 2,500 ships to the rescue of the Philadelphians, but they'll only arrive in 7 days.

Meanwhile on channel 1 he tells Eleonor what's happened with P@.

Good Eleonor is as deeply puzzled as he is. "Your readings were *completely* normal. Dr Elchevarra must not be referring to something physical."

"I think the time has come to mathack into this damn medical chip! Computer, access code VIRGINIA#11,867,461," Hiram invokes on channel 12, while on channel 3 Luke is showing the new premises he has just bought to

expand their factory. An entire level of Industrial Station B-16 Around Neptune. On channels 6 to 9 he finds the Virginias quite ordinary, so he erases them and brings up another batch of 120.

Colonel Varga erupts into channel 5, "Sorry Hiram but I can't get the information you asked about which ships would be available to take part in an immediate attack on Philadelphia 6. Your CSS security codes don't give us access to tactical information here."

Speaking from 1, Eleonor sends a "Hello!" to channel 5.

Varga immediately duplicates himself into channel 1, "Hello, beautiful!" he greets her in his gentleman's voice. "How are you today?"

"We're in turmoil," she explains the situation to him, while on channel 5 he and Hiram are discussing access codes. "Just contact Novalis," Hiram instructs Varga. "Tell him I'm no longer resigning, would he please give us the key to the network of the Philadelphian Air Force."

"On my way!" Varga disappears from channel 5.

"Ah shit!" Hiram swears on channel 12.

Channel 1 Eleonor and Varga duplicate themselves into channel 12.

"What's happening over here, darling?"

"Access to the medical history chip is protected with a fantastic firewall. Never seen anything like it."

"Hadn't you said the chip would open if you were to fall into a coma?" Eleonor remembers. "Why don't you try to trick it? Send a simulation of very disturbed systemic readings?"

"I've already tried, it won't take it. This chip has been reprogrammed by a top-level mathacker. I wonder if it could be..."

Mat Donohoo. Of course! Who else?

3.11 Sunday 18:05 (ETA 105 hours)

By 18:05, the chip's defence system still hasn't yielded. Hiram closes all VR channels. After asking directions from the computer, he rushes to level 19.

Crossing the doorway of shooting ground 47, he finds himself on the snowy summit of a gigantic mountain range. In all directions there are climbing peaks lost in luminous wool-like clouds. Exceptionally peaceful.

An instant Point-click.

Sharp frequencies of undaunted enthusiasm. Hiram's unstoppable side flares. He tunes into the beloved presence. "*Virginia, I love you! Wait for me, I am on my way,*" he swears. The mountain range is his witness.

The muffled thump-thump of steps in the snow calls him back to virtuality. Kuan Y!n is coming to meet him. She's no longer wearing her fractal make-up. Walking by her side is a tall guy with long curly hair, a black scarf tied around his forehead.

"TOP Hiram, this is Zaban!" Kuan Y!n introduces the knight.

"TOP Zaban!" Hiram sends a warm Point impulse.

"TOP Hiram!" Zaban replies in a low-pitched voice. No smile or any change in facial expression. The man is dense, totally centred.

"Let's go, everyone arrived early!" Kuan Y!n takes Hiram's arm and they walk through the snow. It's AR, so it feels like walking on a normal floor, but the program accompanies each of their steps with a snowy-sounding thump.

"Not a common VR you have here," Hiram comments on the elated feeling awakened by the landscape. "Is it an Archive prog?"

"Right and righteous, man of the Law!" Kuan Y!n answers.

The Himalayans are sitting cross-legged in the snow, forming a circle. The Panther is with them.

Just seeing her makes Hiram's heart leap with joy.

TOPs are exchanged, the circle is enlarged, Hiram sits down with them.

But where is the other man? There were supposed to be two of them left in the choir. Yet there are only 7 people here.

"Mohan is staying with his mother on Philadelphia 23. His brother was killed last Friday," Sally answers the unspoken question.

"He'll be back in a few days," Gwen adds.

Hiram finds her intimidating because she is nearly three heads taller than him. Can't watch her face without a view of the ceiling. A cloudless sky.

They begin with a short focussing, Point-tuning into the Archive, bringing down the golden presence of the Brown Robe.

When they reopen their eyes the Panther is shining, her Point illumined with Revelation-Sky sparks.

Boy, is she special! Szar's words come to mind, "A gift from the gods."

"Friends, I have news," she announces. "High Command was most impressed with your performance last Friday. Colonel MacGuirk has decided to start training you on Scalene 333s. Which is why Hiram is joining this intensive." Turning towards him, "Your orders are to be fully operational on a 333 within 5 days."

He answers with a nod. An exciting prospect. There is no craft that boosts your Point like the Scalene 333. The others remain very quiet. Perhaps because they're on duty. It's a you-react-you-die time.

Or perhaps because they are mourning their friends.

"Hiram, have you studied the superastral model of the 333?" the Panther asks.

He nods, "I often fly 333s, Commander." The 333 and the 245 are Hiram's favourite reconnaissance fighters when it comes to inspecting the surroundings of Philadelphia 6.

She frowns, "You mean... RR flights or VR simulations?"

He finds the question surprising. "Virtual, of course!"

The Himalayans smile.

"So you are all familiar with the theory, we can take off immediately. Take position in the gravito-fields," the Panther orders, getting rid of the mountain range, revealing the RR shooting ground: a forty-metre long hall at the end of which there is a row of 12 gravito-field units.

She is particularly beautiful when she gives orders. The voice is smooth, the flow is harmonious. And yet such compelling authority!

Sigh.

By walking in the right place, carefully watching everyone's movements from the Point and adjusting his position accordingly, Hiram manages to get the gravito-field just near hers.

Now each of them is on the flight deck of a Scalene 333. They are on MS7's docking station 1, waiting for the green light to take off. Around them, the hangar full of fighters, shuttles and military personnel. They're on the far side, where the massive 333 beasts are parked. Sitting in such a monster always reminds Hiram of his mad dinosaur rides in Sigfr!d's Jurassic Farm. And the superastrality of the 333's model makes your Point feel like you're flushed with HR amphets.

"We'll begin with a reconnaissance mission around Philadelphia 17," the Panther orders. "White Bear, you're in command."

"Yes, sir!" Sally answers. Being in command makes her voice change. She's no longer a friendly welcoming party. She's a dangerous white bear.

Sally calls, "White Bear to Hiram. Would be easier for me to organise the flight formation if I could know your maruding score."

Sitting in his gravito chair, Hiram twists his hands with embarrassment. "Hiram to White Bear... I'm sorry, I don't have one."

"White Bear to Hiram. You mean... you can't talk about it?"

"Negative, White Bear. I mean I do not have a maruding score."

An embarrassed silence. How can someone spend more than three years at TS5 academy and not have a maruding score?

"Hiram to Black Panther, protected. May I tell them the truth? There's nothing classified about it."

"Black Panther to Hiram, protected. Speak your truth, man of the Law!"

"Hiram to White Bear. Two and a half years ago I scored 278. Then for two years I was too sick to score. The computer invalidated my 278 record. When I finished being sick I was too busy to go shooting."

A tantalising biography. Makes the Himalayans scratch their heads. What the hell can make a TS5 student too busy to attend the shooting ground?

"White Bear to Himalayans. We'll be flying a heptagonal formation, ARCTYC. Invoke your virtual copilots and navigators."

In Hiram's flight deck, a large holograph has just appeared, floating in the air. A flat seven-sided polygon pointing forwards with the face of each pilot placed at the corner which they are to occupy. Hiram is at the left back corner, Edith on his front left, Black Panther on his right.

He conjures up Varga as his navigator in the first chair on the left. On his right, Szar is the copilot. "Praise the Great Apollo, Master Szar!"

The craft starts moving, slowly gliding towards the central track of docking station 1.

From his Point, Hiram knows the Panther has detected Szar's presence.

Szar smiles, amused, "Have you asked her for a piece of hair?"

"Shut up!" Hiram whispers in a hurry.

"She can't hear us, it's a true simulation," Szar reassures him. "So... would you like me to open a protected channel and ask her for the piece of hair? I can't see how she could refuse me that, you know."

"Enough, copilot!" Hiram tells him off. "You're here to help me, not to wreck my concentration. If I may remind you."

"Yes, *sir*!" the Master of Thunder nods but keeps smiling.

Following Edith's 333, Hiram's craft is already in space, quickly followed by the Panther's. The first part of the flight is spent in silence, Point-pairing. Opening to the high skies of superastrality, receiving strength before the battle. If battle there must be.

Point-pairing is always an elating experience, but this flight is special. Of course there's the Panther. Point-pairing with her is somewhat akin to achieving a life purpose. At the same time, her Point feels so familiar, it's hard to believe.

"She is *so much* like you!" Hiram whispers to Szar.

Szar is in a perky mood. "Wait till you meet Serah!" he winks.

But there's not just the Panther. The alpha-alpha Himalayans have magnificent energies. Their togetherness radiates a luminous mathematical purity. It gives Hiram an immediate sense of belonging. More than a gathering, it's a communion, like these 7 Points have known each other forever. Together they are flying to the Great Dawn, the marvellous future, the next great step in humanity's playful youth. Eternity begins today.

"Black Panther to Himalayans. An early warning from MS7: 12 Z-99s on their way to meet us. ETA 21 minutes."

There's a false note in the Point-ness.

Someone is reacting. A nasty wave of anxiety bugging the token ring.

Hiram holds onto the Golden Sun, trying to lift up the energy. But the false note only gets worse. Coming from at least four of them.

He'd hate to imagine what would happen if they had to fight in such conditions.

"Panther to Himalayans. No, no, no! This is never going to work. Simulation terminated!" She disconnects the VRR space scenery, returns the AR snowy summits. "Everyone back on Mount Kailash!" she orders.

It's sunset on Mount Kailash. They leave their gravito-fields and thump-thump their way to where they were sitting before. Sally looks tense. Kuan Y!n and Gwen are pale. Edith is livid. Zaban is looking straight in front of him, impassive, grounded like a rock.

They reconstitute the circle, and to break the frozen feeling the Panther clothes herself in a thick black furry AR coat with a hood. Zaban immediately follows her, cloaking himself in white fur. Everyone invokes colourful AR coats and the Panther announces, "Transpersonal motivation time! Hiram!"

"Sir!"

"Suppose Edith comes to see you and tells you she's thinking about leaving the knights, what do you tell her?"

They all lock onto him.

There's a feeling of deja vu to this scene. Hiram closes his eyes a second, remembering how he felt when Penelope had to choose between her dog and the knighthood.

He seeks inspiration high up, in Teyani's wisdom.

When he reopens his eyes, his Point is shining the light of the Eagle. He speaks from his heart, "I'd tell her, go! Go immediately, never think of coming back. The Mother of the Light will protect your way. You are just too beautiful a person to die in an engagement against the Rex's fighters."

Said with devastating candour. Edith has tears in her eyes. Kuan Y!n grins, "Touché!" Zaban smiles. The Panther bites her lip, like Szar does.

"I know, I know, this isn't gonna help us win the war!" Hiram raises his hands, making them laugh.

"Kuan Y!n, what would you say?" the Panther asks.

"I'd say... how about a week of cathartic HR for the Himalayans?"

"I second this!" Sally says.

"Yeah! Yeah!" Consensus among the Himalayans. Easy to see why. There's death in their eyes. The imprints of last Friday are still fresh. They've triggered some deep emotional shit.

"All right, starting now!" the Panther agrees. "Computer activate cathartic HR signals level 5!"

Their eyes can't detect any change but the mountains are now being broadcast in the form of microsignals with a devastatingly potent effect on their nervous systems. Meanwhile, the computer is scanning each individual's response, adjusting the bombardment accordingly. It will take a few hours before they start feeling the effects.

"Now, what if Edith *had* to go and fly a mission in 60 minutes. A crucial mission," the Panther goes on. "What would you say?"

Shaken as she is now, she wouldn't stand a chance. Just one encounter with a Z-99, and bye bye cruel world. The Rex wins.

Silence.

Edith has closed her eyes. She's calling on the light with all her strength.

They're all trying to hold her Point, but it's not enough. She's about to crack up large scale.

Hiram looks at her, wishing he had something to give. He feels small, inadequate. Here, if one person could help, it would have to be...

Barkhan Seer!

Hiram stands up, "I'd say, White Line, Point-paired, single reality, Take it?"

Startled, Edith turns to the Panther, who acquiesces with a nod. Edith gives a handclap and stands up, "Taken!

Together they thump-thump to the other end of the hall, where they mind-switch a separate reality. A dark space. They sit face to face, their backs very straight, Point-tuning into each other. As soon as he holds her Point, Hiram invokes, "White Line!"

Shooting up into the light.

Not a journey, an explosion. There's light everywhere, it's so bright you can't even see yourself in it. It keeps imploding into brighter and brighter zeniths. Miraculous. Awesome.

And lo, the White Eagle! Carrying her in his wings. Whispering a message to her. The message says,

Edge of Highness. Whiteness Eternal. Forever Love.

Hiram makes himself a flame of aspiration reaching as high as the Edge of Highness. "White Eagle, bless us! Give us the strength."

Tidal wave of silence. An absolute stillness.

With Virginia's presence in the background.

You left your keys at No Limits.

"Edith, here comes the man I wanted you to see!"

He is walking towards them, inundated with gold. So much gold, his brown robe can hardly be guessed.

Master Barkhan Seer, prince of Thunder.

In one glance, Barkhan Seer floods her reality with liquid gold. Then his irresistible fire turns to Hiram, "Son, something important I must remind you of. When you first asked about your place in the game, what did I say?"

"You said I was a weapon."

"A formidable weapon. And a weapon in the hand of God, you are. Let this be your joy, and your joy will know no limits. Never, never let selfish motives override your joy of serving the Divine! Now go in peace and win the war!"

At once, the dark space reappears. The two knights find themselves on MS7, which is in the solar system, close to the orbit of a planet called Mercury. But the liquid gold and the Eagle's Whiteness haven't disappeared, Edith's eyes are still ablaze with them.

"Now!" she says, fierce. "Now, I can fly the mission!"

Hiram gives a handclap, "Taken!"

Together, they get up and walk back to Mount Kailash.

"Don't you want to know your score?" Edith asks.

"Ah, don't bother. With me it doesn't work."

She asks, anyway. "Score?"

The usual muffled voice, "White Line absolute. Score beyond evaluation."

"Oh my God!"

"See, what did I tell you," he shrugs

She laughs, and gives a handclap of big bang proportions, "I can feel it with me, today! It's..." she looks for words.

"It's the Apocalypse!" Hiram puts it.

The Himalayans are just finishing their session of transpersonal motivation. Judging by the defeated attitude on their faces, it wasn't a complete success. They watch the return of their friends with interest.

These two are walking like anything standing in their way would be pulverised in one glance. When they reach the circle Edith announces, "Commander, requesting permission to fly the crucial mission!"

"Commander," Hiram asks, "requesting permission to fly the mission too!"

The Panther gives them a look, holding her chin, not unlike Szar when he twinges his beard. "Permission granted to Edith! Hiram, tonight you could perhaps take the time to establish a maruding score for yourself."

"Yes, sir! How do I do that?"

"By destroying as much of the Rex's hardware as possible, of course!" she gets up and leads the way to the gravito-fields. Edith and Hiram follow her, and the others behind them. There's a decidedness in the air which Kuan Y!n summarises in three words, "Frightening shit, here!"

"Yeah!" Sally and Gwen approve, and Zaban gives a half-nod.

Edith is sent to rescue a pilot stranded in space close to the infamous stocking. Hiram is plugged into a shoot-the-Z-77 hypergame. He takes position in his Scalene 333, invokes Szar and Varga, finds himself in space within visible range of Philadelphia 17, where Amy lives.

There are four Z-77 fighters on their way.

"They will be within scanner range in 120 seconds," Varga announces.

"Hiram to Black Panther, protected. Can I use *all* the maruding techniques I have learnt?"

"Black Panther to Hiram, unprotected. No limits!"

No limits? Mm... Hiram Point-pairs with Barkhan Seer.

"60 seconds!"

Hiram feels he is a gigantic hammer in the hand of God, ready to smite the Z-77s.

"30 seconds... 15 seconds..." Varga holds his breath, then, "Within scanner range!"

Hiram's Point instantly grabs the superastral models of the four Z-77s all at once. At the same time, he identifies another superastral model, above that of the fighters. And an over-model, one step higher up. A big, fat, 4D beauty, revolving around a hypersphere. Beyond time, there is knowing – if this over-model is smashed, the Z-77s simply *cannot* exist!

Fury of God. The Hammer smites. A torrent of superastral fire is unleashed into the over-model.

Then everything goes flat. All the superastral models disappear.

So do the space, the Scalene 333, Szar and Varga. In the gravito-field near to his, Hiram hears Edith complaining, "So what's happened to my mission?"

They both get up. In the shooting ground, Mount Kailash has disappeared. There's just an empty hall, dimly lit by security lights.

Holding her chin, the Panther is looking at Hiram, a perplexed glow in her eyes.

"Score?" Hiram asks tentatively.

No answer.

He raises his voice, "Computer, SCORE!"

Still no answer.

"Yelling at computers doesn't fix problems," the Panther quotes the age-old adage. "Hiram, do you realise what you have just done?"

"Well..."

Three security guards carrying phaser rifles erupt into the room. One of them shouts, "Hands up! No one moves!"

Flabbergasted, the Himalayans and Hiram put their hands up.

"It's all right, Lieutenant! Nothing to worry about!" the Panther says.

"I said, hands up!" the lieutenant yells, pointing his rifle at her. "You are all under arrest."

She obeys. "What's the crime?"

"The computer network has just been attacked. We have four entire levels of MS7 off line. The attack came from this room, we have the proof!"

Oops!

Hiram laments. That means... no maruding score!

3.12 Monday 01:50 (ETA 97.2 hours) Betrayed

Well after midnight, when Hiram returns to his cabin, he sits on the floor and activates Multi-V. On channel 1, Eleonor looks like she's been worrying, "It's very late! Where have you been?"

"In jail. Guess what I found out! The Panther is the niece of Fleet Admiral Lavash. He's one of the big chiefs of High Command!"

Eleonor is making efforts to contain herself. "In jail?"

"I wish it could have lasted longer! I had her *all to myself*, in the cell. Until she managed to speak to Admiral Lavash. We were released, just like that!" he snaps his fingers. While he begins telling her the complete story, he creates three fashion parades with random selections of 500 Virginias each on channel 6, 8 and 17. On channel 7, he invokes his full mathacker's arsenal and pats his own shoulder, threatening, "You bitch of a chip are going to talk, let me tell you!"

He conjures up Varga, "Did Novalis give us the key to the network?"

"I couldn't speak to him. He hasn't been on MS7 in the last two days."

"Ah, damn it! Damn it!"

With full access, Hiram could have used raw power, meaning secretly diverted computer resources from all Philadelphian networks to perform squillions of tests and calculations, attacking the medical history chip from all sides. Not very elegant, mathematically speaking, but near-irresistible. Now he is going to have to fight Mat Donohoo's algorithms with algorithms, which ain't gonna be no piece of cake.

"Let's start!"

Meanwhile on channel 17 he notices a particularly attractive Virginia. Wavy brown-reddish hair, cute dimples, beaming eyes. "What's your name?"

"Virginia #19,754,003," she gives an enigmatic smile, not unlike the Panther's.

On channel 1, Eleonor is listening to the end of the story, laughing her head off.

Hiram continues, "After I warned the security officer that there were major flaws in his network's immune system, the Panther waited for him to walk out of the cell. Then she pointed her finger at me and said, 'Hiram, from here on I

want you to *shut up*! Understood? Not one more word until we get out of here!"

"And what did you say?"

"Nothing, of course! I obeyed. I just gave a nod each time she said something. Anyway I was too busy looking for a piece of hair, in case she might leave one in her trail."

"It's really tough luck we didn't get one. It was the ideal opportunity!"

"I know! After we were released I went back to the shooting ground. I spent 40 minutes checking every single position she had occupied. No luck! I need a RR hair detector. Is there any such thing?"

Eleonor scans MS7's knowledge banks. "No, not that I can see."

Hiram feels unstoppable, "Let's invent one!"

"Darling, darling... don't you think it would be easier to ask her?"

Hiram shakes his head, "I could never do that!"

"May I remind you it's the Apocalypse and you can do *anything*?"

"Yes, I know. But not that!"

Math!lda turns up on channel 22, "Edith Ladiv would like to speak to you, but only if you are not asleep."

"Mm..." Eleonor smiles, rubs her hands, bends her head to the side and looks at Hiram over her glasses, "Who is this Edith who calls you at 02:41 in the morning?"

"She's my brother knight! What do you think?" Hiram turns channel 22 into a cool reality in which he is sitting in bed, dressed in a dark-blue kimono embroiled with golden lotus flowers, watching the news, casually taking sips of a rose lhassi through a pink straw.

"Hello, Edith!"

She's sitting in bed too, wearing a silky nightgown that leaves her shoulders uncovered, "Hello, Hiram. How are your lobsters?"

Another sip of lhassi. "Oh, quite good. Actually, my partner and I are just about to release a new product: Succulent Crab. The result of months of research. And what about you. Not sleeping?"

"Just about to. Which is why I called. To say... good night!"

There's a sincerity in her smile that zeroes into Bobby.

"Good night, then!" Tender smile. EOC.

On channel 7, he shouts, "Oh shit! Eleonor, come quick!"

Channel 1 Eleonor clones herself into channel 7, "Is the chip starting to talk to you?"

"No, but I've discovered something terrible. Eleonor..." he bites his lip.

She has never seen him so upset. "What?" she takes his hand.

A horrified glow in his eyes.

She puts her arm on his shoulder, takes her sweetest voice, "Tell me!"

"The chip... is in full control of my medicomputer! It redirects all the medicomputer's readings to itself and modifies them before sending them back. These tests you conducted on me this morning... the results were bogus. They

were what the chip wanted us to believe. And it's been going on like this for about 3 years. Wherever I go, the chip takes control."

Knowing the amount of programming power concentrated in the chip, Mat Donohoo is *really* trying to hide something. If it hadn't been for the twisted ankle, Hiram might never have found out.

But the truth is horrible.

Inhaling a long breath, Hiram finally finds the courage to say, "Eleonor, the chip was even manipulating you!" Tears in his eyes, "You, Szar, Varga, Harry... all the people I trusted. Even the cat!"

The chip had the power to control anything remotely linked to his medicomputer. Hiram's entire library of clones was under its influence. And there is clear evidence showing the chip has been manipulating all of them. Every day. Every minute they spent in his company.

Eleonor is in shock. She lets go of his hand, takes one step back, rubs the top of her nose where the glasses irritate her skin. "This is a nightmare! Like learning I am betraying my own child. Do you have any idea what the chip is making me do?"

"Not a clue," Hiram closes all channels but 7 and bursts into tears. "I trusted you so much!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry," Eleonor bursts into tears too. She always does when he cries, it's her sentimental nature. "How I wish I could be worthy of your trust!"

"But you are!"

"No," she sobs, "I don't want you to trust me *ever* again."

"Eleonor, please!" he takes her hand. "I have just freed you from the chip. Now you are yourself again."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive!" he plugs her into the 2.7 million diagnostic tests which the computer has just run.

"I see!" she says, thoroughly studying each of the 2.7 million tests while blowing her nose in a virtual handkerchief. When she cries, she always blows her nose. "Oh, my God! Look at that, it's even influenced my choice of which genetic units I taught you."

And the way Harry taught him mathematics. And where the cat scratched him. And the Archive stories Szar told him. Even the choice of contraceptives when he made love to Penelope.

"All right, this is war!" Pulling herself together Eleonor stops her tears, blows her nose one last time, puts on her spectacles, inhales a deep breath, looks Hiram in the eyes, "Do you want me to leave?"

A turning point in their relationship. If it survives this, then they will *virtually* be mother and son.

Speaking from high, "No, please don't go. I need you. I love you."

"I love you too. I'm with you, Hiram. Totally!" Fierce like a lioness protecting her cub. "Now you have freed the medicomputer from the chip's influence, let's run a full battery of tests again."

"Agreed! But if you don't mind we're going to start with isolating this medicomputer from MS7's network," Hiram decides. "We don't trust *anyone*!"

"If we isolate ourselves from the network, there are tests we won't be able to conduct."

"I don't care. Let's start with what our medicomputer can tell us," Hiram drags himself into the gravito-field and takes off his softmetal suit.

In a matter of seconds, Eleonor has already received and processed the results of the first 2,000 tests. She bites her lip, an air of devastation about her.

"I don't want any bullshit! You're going to tell me the truth, aren't you?"

"I swear. Darling... less than 3% of the tests are normal. Your hormonal levels are all over the place. Your blood parameters do not match any recorded pattern. Your blood group can't be determined. There are abnormal cells in every single system of your body. Your brain scan shows a cerebral cortex doubled in width, an enlargement of the pineal gland, abnormal structures in just about every nucleus..."

So is this what the chip was hiding?

Hiram is a mutant.

3.13 Genetic pandemonium

As the night goes on, ugly facts emerge one after the other.

The medicomputer detects about 10,000 new cancers appearing in Hiram's body every second, 81% of them in the nervous system.

"That's because normally, neurones never reproduce. Every second in your body there are more neurones born than blood cells. The computer sees cancers in the making everywhere."

But that's not much compared to the state of utter chaos of his genetic material. The DNA in his nervous system is grossly different from that of the rest of his body. "This is absurd!" Eleonor keeps repeating. "How can you possibly stay in one piece with different sets of genetic material in each organ?" Even from one part of his brain to the other, there are major discrepancies. And it's not even that some mutation has taken place at one stage in the past and that Hiram's system is now fighting for balance. New mutations keep appearing every second, especially in the nervous system. In a normal body, the DNA is the *one thing* that's fixed at birth and never changes. Hiram's DNA is completely unstable. It shows random variations from one second to the next, without any detectable reason.

"I have *no idea* what can possibly cause this. Your DNA has gone wild. Never heard of anything like it. And if I had, I wouldn't have believed it! It's a scientific impossibility," Eleonor is even more perplexed than dismayed. "Listen... I don't think you should stay in the medicomputer much longer. At the moment it is killing cells all over the place, trying to fight what it interprets as emerging cancers. But I'm not sure it knows what it's doing. I even think... it might be wise to reinstall the chip's control for a few minutes, just to clean up the damage we may have caused."

Hiram can't believe his ears. "Reinstall the chip? What the fuck are you saying?" he gets up, which immediately triggers nasty buzzing sounds and flashing red lights in the medicomputer.

Eleonor yells at him, "Don't you dare speak to me like that!"

"Then don't bug me with such nonsense!" he yells back.

"It's not nonsense, it's *perfectly* logical. That chip has kept you alive for months. It may be wicked but at least it knows what it's doing. We don't!"

While the heat continues to rise between them, in the background the medicomputer keeps buzzing and flashing red light. It speaks a warning, "Bobby Elmian, either return to your medicomputer or report to the MS7's central hospital immediately." Hiram finds this particularly aggravating. "Fuck you!" he yells, kicking the wall real hard at the place where the gravito-field's engine is lodged and mindswitching it offline.

Sweet-eyed blond Math!lda ARs herself into the room. "Hiram," she speaks in her totally boring calm voice, "may I remind you that last night you were exposed to cathartic HR signals level 5, designed to reveal latent emotional charges such as fear, or anger?"

"S'got nothing to do with it!" he shrugs and switches her offline.

"Yes it probably has!" Eleonor inhales a deep, deep breath. "For me anyway," she immediately adds, to avoid starting another argument.

"Do you mean the network is manipulating you to be more emotional?"

"No but there's a well-known effect: when people are exposed to cathartic HR level 4 or more, their emotions reflect onto virtual clones. It even works with virtual pets."

The Saint-Bernard choir had observed that many times with their dog.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't want to be rude to you!" Hiram apologises. To give her a hug he can't go VRR because he doesn't want to have anything to do with the gravito-field. So he just lets go of his RR carcass on the bed, switches onto pure VR, enters channel 1, takes Eleonor in his arms, kisses her on both cheeks.

Having made peace they switch onto channel 7, where Hiram's algorithms are fighting against the chip's protection walls. All pathways to his medical history are still sealed, but a new fact has just emerged.

The chip constantly sends testing signals throughout the entire computer network of MS7. The probing goes even further. It reaches as far as Philadelphia 12, the station where the order of the knights originated.

And what if the bridges were severed?

Hiram tests, disconnecting the chip from the external world.

"Stop!" Eleonor shouts, immediately reinstalling the communication pathways between the chip and the Philadelphian networks. "Look at this!" she brings up virtual panels showing the detailed analysis of the signals sent out by the chip during the time of disconnection.

Oh shit!

The chip was making preliminary steps towards causing a massive explosion.

Even more shocking than the genetic pandemonium.

"But it was going to blow us up!" Hiram's mouth drops open.

"In 9 minutes. A huge bang, enough to wipe out two entire levels of MS7," she says, eyes closed, rubbing her nose.

"But then... then I'm a prisoner! If I tried to escape the Philadelphias, after 10 minutes this fucking chip would destroy me and everything around me!"

Outrage beyond words.

"I need a break!" he tells Eleonor. Disconnecting all virtualities, he finds himself naked on his mattress in the empty 3 by 3 cabin.

Fooled. Betrayed. They have all lied to him. They have made him a mutant, a monster. And they have chained him!

Chained him.

How could they *possibly* chain him?

Beyond anger, annihilation. The archetypal axis of the world has collapsed.

So what's different from Hyper-Earth Link, exactly?

In Hyper-Earth Link, he was enslaved in HR, no way out. His virtual family was manipulated against him by the ON. Here he is enslaved too, no way out, his virtual family manipulated by Mat's mathacker's tricks.

At least the Rex wasn't fucking with his genetic code.

Or was he?

Invoking channel 1, "Eleonor, when I was in HEL, was my genetic code tampered with?"

"Not after you were born. But the genetic material of the germ cells out of which you were produced had been engineered for you to display numerous health and mental weaknesses..."

He switches her off. Doesn't want to hear more.

Some people say their misery started the day they were born. With Hiram, it started in the fucking test tube! Worse than a born loser, he was *conceived* to lose.

Anyhow, none of this matters any more. The bottom line is,

Virginia, Virginia! Why would you ever want me, now?

A great soul like you could have loved me, even though I am small and ugly. When a man is apocalyptic enough, these things do not matter as much. And the mathematical sky is my witness, I swear – I swear! – I would have been an apocalyptic companion. Every day would have been unforgettable, Virginia. Every minute...

But there are limits to everything. Why would you want a walking cancer by your side? A fucking mutant bred to marude the Rex's hardware, a guy who could start growing antennas any minute.

And a mutant out of control, moreover. Last evening I blew up 11.47% of MS7's computer network. What next?

Virginia, Virginia... I'm losing you!

Then there is nothing left – nothing but a Moebius strip with agony written on one side and despair on the other.

Might as well leave. Forget everything. Start a new life in the Outer Planets. Far, far away from the Sun. Give Luke a hand, perhaps.

Invoking Elias Sharamollon on channel 3, "What's Luke's surname by the way?"

The grossly obese small man appears, "Luke Poisson, he is ..."

"Thank you!" Hiram gets rid of the VAC. "I bet with my reworking of Simon's theory of hypersynchronicity, we could engineer crustaceans with phenomenal taste."

Crazy ideas run wild. Squid with spirit. VR restaurants under water (at least, they wouldn't smell). Seafood, the new drug. Seafood made apocalyptic.

Math!lda ARs herself in, "Edith Ladiv wanting to speak to you, if you are not asleep."

Hiram recreates the cool atmosphere on channel 22. Still sitting in bed, dressed in his blue kimono, inspecting VR panels with the latest spreadsheets that Luke sent him.

She's more honest than him. She's still in bed too but her face looks like a mop. She's been crying all night.

Immediate wave of empathy for this suffering soul. "What's wrong with you, friend?"

She shrugs, "Cathartic HR always does that to me. And you, are you okay?"

"Oh yeah, quite okay." Cool voice. "Except... I've decided I'm leaving the knights."

She thinks it's a joke, it makes her laugh. A ray of sunshine in Hiram's dark, desolated landscape.

He looks straight into her eyes, "Have you ever made love in a bomb?"

Startled for a second, then an intrigued smile, "That's by far the most interesting proposition I've had in a long time."

He looks down, pretending, "Oh, forget it! I could never do that. Except..." he returns to her eyes, "except if you could keep it a secret. You see, the bomb is classified-level 6."

She laughs, "Are you serious?"

Apocalyptically intense, "Ve-ry!"

She gives a handclap, "Taken!" And she gets up and walks straight into his reality. For casual sex, well-behaved people always use pure VR.

Hiram mindswitches the secret codes, turning channel 22 into the inside of his favourite bomb. In a matter of seconds, the young woman finds herself lying in the nuclear fusion chamber, passionately making love with a secret agent.

He rips her silky nightgown, throws himself into her, full of rage, bites off the lobe of her left ear and swallows it – hey, it's not virtual sex for nothing. She's so taken by surprise that she comes nearly immediately.

He detonates the bomb. A long, long deflagration.

It's the main difference with a RR P-21. RR P-21s detonate in 12.175 seconds. His bedroom P-21 keeps detonating as long as the woman comes.

In a desperate call, he sends off with all the power of his Point,

Farewell, Virginia! I loved you. I really loved you.

3.14 Monday 04:35 Philadelphia 6

Outside the wood cabin. By the lake. Surrounded by the pine forest. The lake where Bobby spent his youth. Virginia wakes up, screaming, "No! No! Don't abandon me!"

Her friend Jane walks towards her, "What's happening to you?"

Virginia catches her breath, rubbing her eyes, fighting a headache, "I don't know. A dream."

Jane is amazed, "You remember dreams?"

"No!" Virginia says, knowing only too well the ON is listening.

One can't remember dreams. Dreams don't exist. People who believe they remember dreams are mentally disturbed. They require treatment.

"Are you all right, now?"

Virginia bursts into tears.

Don't abandon me! Please don't abandon me! If I lose you... then there is nothing left. Nothing!

Jane starts worrying, "Virginia, be careful! You can't just cry like this."

Crying is a sign of major neurohormonal imbalance. It requires treatment. Urgent treatment. If dealt with immediately, the tears may never come back. If not treated properly, the neurohormonal imbalance may lead the patient to commit anti-social acts. Anti-social acts lead to conflicts. Crying *must* be treated.

Thank the Almighty Network Administrator, three women in white with the insignia of ON officials on their forehead have already appeared. Health officers. Helpful women with kind attitudes on their faces. They walk towards Virginia. "Virginia, we came to bring you some relief," the chief officer tells her.

In her hand, a shining redball.

3.15 Monday 08:00 (ETA 91.1 hours) Losing the war

For more than three years, Hiram has been wondering what his first words to Colonel Serah would be, were he ever to meet him. What do you say to your best friend's reincarnation who happens to be the husband of the woman who left you spellbound until you decided you wanted her daughter, who is his daughter too, necessarily, until you finally decided to give up the whole family, having forsaken hope?

"Colonel, I bring you my resignation."

Totally grounded, this Serah. Doesn't even blink when he hears the news. Just holds on to the massive column of energy above his Point.

Standing by his side, Colonel Marek Elchevarra, a tall man with devastatingly black eyes. Thin but broad-shouldered, solid as rock. Angular face, thick moustache, a dark mass of hair. About the same age as Serah, who is 34. In an army where 70% of pilots die before they reach the age of 27, air force colonels are bound to be young.

Hiram goes on, "I'll give you the information you want. And I'll teach your pilots how to marude the P-21s. On the condition you get that chip out of my

body, of course," he points to his left shoulder. "But after that I want out. I don't want to have anything to do with the knights."

Who gives a fuck if they get insulted! Hiram's career in the Philadelphian Air Force is over.

Serah remains impassive, looking Hiram in the eyes.

Oh, Hiram knows exactly what Serah is doing at the moment: calling on the White Eagle. He has seen Szar do exactly the same so many times!

It's actually what Hiram feared the most. Szar had warned him, it was bound to happen: Serah and Szar are *so much* alike...

Not physically. Serah is smaller, doesn't have a beard, doesn't have long curly hair, doesn't wear a brown robe, doesn't have the musculature of a gladiator on steroids. Serah has the same eyes as the Panther, short black hair, tanned skin, prominent cheekbones. But, Hiram is afraid, the differences stop there. With your eyes closed, there is no way to tell them apart.

Which is why Hiram has no choice but close his heart, close his Point, and stare at him like a stubborn asshole. If he allows himself to be sentimental, he'll never get out of this madhouse. Szar... sorry, Serah would get him back in a 333 in less time than it takes the White Eagle to illumine Szar's eyes.

Serah doesn't speak. White Eagle's tactic, we know it by heart thank you.

It's Marek Elchevarra who asks, "Are you going to tell us your reasons?"

Bluntly, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Brother... we had the impression you had manifested clear intentions to come and work with us," Elchevarra nods. "We thought you liked us."

"I've changed my mind."

Elchevarra lets out a long sigh, flexes his left forearm, looks down to his fist. Clench. Unclench. Clench...

Copying Serah's idiosyncrasies like a puppet.

The silence grows tenser.

"Right! The Apocalypse was never meant to be easy, was it?" Serah puts his hand on Elchevarra's shoulder.

Szar's diversion tactics. We know them by heart too, thank you.

Seems to work with Elchevarra. There's a kind of grin on his face. He drops his forearm, "So what? You're pissed off at Mat for playing intel games with you, is that it?" For Serah, he adds, "Until he arrived here, Hiram had no idea Mat had engaged the Descent process for him."

The Descent process. Is that what they call it?

Serah remains White Eagle, not letting on whether he knew or not.

"Not just playing intel games. Playing with my life!" Hiram reminds them.

"From what I understand, there wasn't much of it left when Mat began with you," Elchevarra points out. "Anyway, hadn't you noticed lately you had an uncanny ability for cracking multi-dimensional models? Where did you think it came from? Healthy diet, perhaps..."

"All right, I've been naive!" Hiram raises his voice. "All right, you're fighting a dirty war, you can't do it without playing dirty tricks. But I don't want to know about them. I, am, out!"

"No you are not!" Marek retorts. "With the process, there is no turning back."

"I'd like to see that!" Hiram scorns. The arrogance of someone who hasn't anything to lose because he's already lost everything. "What are you going to do to me? Throw me in jail? Kill me, perhaps?"

"Hiram..." Serah suddenly screams, "shut up!"

The violence in his voice is wild. Takes Hiram by surprise. Leaves him stunned for a second.

"Brethren," Serah resumes in a normal voice, "I suggest we rewind and start again when I was about to say: One, Hiram we got you a promotion. You are now a lieutenant of the Philadelphian Air Force. Two, Marek and I need a new pilot to join our choir. How about a four-day trial to see if you fit the job? Say, yes."

An invitation to join Serah's choir?

Incredulous. Speechless.

For one second. Then, "No!"

"Right!" Serah sucks a deep breath in through his teeth, "Well, if threats do not work, I guess we'll have to resort to explanations. Hiram, what do you know of the process, exactly?"

"Nothing. Except it has turned my body into a complete mess."

"So let me tell you why Master Barkhan Seer launched the project, code-named 'Descent'. Perhaps you haven't noticed, Hiram, but we are losing the war."

Another punch in the stomach. Not exactly what Hiram has been taught at the academy.

"We are losing the fucking war!" Serah hammers, gradually raising his voice, "We have invented neurocybernetics and maruding, raised thousands of knights to supermind level, trained the most fantastic pilots of all times, conducted large-scale psychic warfare, and yet none of this is enough. The Rex is winning. Each time we introduce something new, he finds a way to counter it. Faster and faster. There were 60 years between the 1st and the 2nd battle of Mercury, 21 years between the 2nd and the 3rd, but then only 10 years to the 4th. And since then the fighting hasn't stopped. Now it's come to breaking point. We've pushed the knights' training to the very limit of what the human nervous system can take. Yet the Rex keeps delivering bigger and better weapons. The bottom line is, we're fighting against a being of a different magnitude. Ants against titan. It simply cannot work. So from here on human beings have two choices: either become gods and transcend all limits, or be wiped out – disappear from the physical universe."

Stunned by the voice power, Hiram catches his breath.

Serah goes on immediately, "You've studied under Semper. There's a Thunder principle you must have heard a few times: you can *be* anything, you can *do* anything! Yes?"

A nod.

Serah leans forwards, bringing his head only a few centimetres from Hiram. Forcing his voice in the low-pitched end, "Do you believe it?"

Defiantly, "Yes, I was starting to believe it!"

Serah grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him. "Not even 2 metres high, not even 200 years old. Can't even take 200 volts without going into shock. And you tell me you can do anything?" He lets go of him contemptuously.

From the Point, "I am *more* than this body!"

"Oh, fine! You're a flame of immortal Spirit?" Serah points his index finger skywards. "Me too! The problem is, it's not up there in the high spheres of the Spirit that the Rex is making war with us, it's down here!" he points his index to Hiram. "Down here, the limitations of the body are thick. It's like a low ceiling, you hit it each time you reach for heaven. You may conceptualise 5D models and play with them in VR, but when it comes to reality you're just a 3D biped. Born to grow old and die. There's nothing you can do about that. Except if you crack the genetic code. Get it?" He hammers, "Cracking the limitations of the genetic code, that's what the Descent process is about. Letting the perfection of the human archetype descend into matter."

"I'd like to know what the genetic chaos in my body has to do with perfection!" Bobby sneers. "What have you done to me? What have you manipulated?"

"The Descent process does not manipulate your genetic code, it opens it. Once opened, your DNA resonates with your consciousness, and starts mutating accordingly."

"But that's mad! Means I could turn into a monster!" Hiram yells.

Serah plunges his Dragon into him, speaks from the Archive, "You can *be* anything, you can *do* anything!"

Talk about taking your destiny in hand!

"Have people died from the Descent process, so far?"

Immediate answer, "Yes. About a third of them." Serah puts it bluntly, "Death is part of the process. One can't crack the genetic nut without going through death-like states. After which some people don't wake up."

Death isn't what worries Hiram the most. Anyway, he himself has lost count of how many times he was declared clinically dead. "But what if the experience went wrong? What if I had all the wrong thoughts? Would that make me a monster?"

"Yes it would. But you don't. You've just spent years thinking about nothing but pure mathematics and P-21s. So you became the solar system's leading expert in maruding A^&~-driven hardware."

Hiram can see how his obsession for the P-21's 5D model has moulded his nervous system. But what about his *real* obsession? What has his passion for Virginia forged inside him?

Burning question. But totally unaskable.

Hiram rubs his nose, unthinkingly copying Eleonor's habit, "But why didn't you tell me?"

Serah protests, "But are you going to stop saying 'you' as if *we* were responsible for everything that's happened to you since you joined TS5?"

Elchevarra nods, "We deeply regret that *they* didn't tell you."

"Who decided to enrol me for the Descent?"

"Master Barkhan Seer and the Archive people. They are the ones who make these decisions."

So even Barkhan Seer was in this!

It leaves Hiram with an ugly taste at the back of his mouth.

To the crux of the matter. "What happens when I say I want to quit? Do you let me go? Do you get rid of that time bomb in my back?"

Short White Eagle silence. Then, "No. I'm sorry, I can't."

Chained to the knights. No way out.

"Hiram, we *cannot* take the risk of letting a descender fall into the hands of the Rex. There is too much at stake. Agreed, Mat should have told you. But now, there is no turning back. True for you, true for us."

Hiram frowns, "True for you?"

Elchevarra grins, "Serah and I are descenders."

Oh.

But that could change everything! Especially if the Panther isn't one.

Elchevarra adds, "All descenders carry a self-destruction chip. And I can assure you, they don't like it!"

The Panther enters, smiling, fresh like dawn in the World to Come. "TOP brethren! Are the Molten Stars celebrating?" Seeing the expression on Marek and Serah's faces, she immediately guesses they aren't. "You mean he hasn't accepted yet? I bet you forgot to tell him it was my idea."

Was it, just?

"Don't waste your time, charm and persuasion do not work with this man. We've just spent an hour trying," Elchevarra informs her.

Serah sighs, shaking his head, "Now, regrettably, you leave us no choice but to resort to violent means." He turns to Elchevarra, "Agreed, Colonel?"

Hiram gulps, smelling *real* danger. These guys are wild. And mutants, moreover.

"Agreed!" Elchevarra's face hardens. "Throw him to the Panther!"

Seeing the horrified look on Hiram's face, the Panther bursts out laughing. The others don't. They just stare at him with kind of half-grins that gradually relax into amused smiles.

Was *this* a joke?

The Panther protectively takes Hiram's arm, "Come on Lieutenant, invite me to La Coupole." Out of one of her pockets she pulls a small star-shaped silver insignia which she clips onto the collar of Hiram's softmetal suit. The promotion is now official.

3.16 Monday 08:55 (ETA 90.1 hours)

To his complete amazement, Hiram finds himself walking the corridors of MS7 arm in arm with the Panther. Like being transported into another world (it

would have to be WTC). As he knew perfectly well, she can be the softest person in the world when she wants to.

"You and I need to talk," she tells him. "I know you don't want to tell me why you focused all your research on the P-21, but I want you to know I am immensely grateful you did. My mother, my daughter, my aunt, all my childhood friends live on Philadelphia 6. If Philadelphia 6 is ever freed from the Rex, it will owe a lot to you."

Rendered bold by the fact he considers himself dead, Hiram lets her know, "I have an invasion plan for Philadelphia 6. It's finalised, now. No one has heard about it yet." But as they are reaching a crowded lift, he whispers, "I can't talk about it here."

In the lift she stands in front of him and looks him in the eyes.

The first time he doesn't feel like a child in front of her. The first time he feels she isn't seeing him as a child.

It triggers something deep. Virginia's presence is with them. And another presence too.

Teyani's presence.

It makes everyone in the lift stop talking. They're standing in a cloud, like the lift is being pulled up by an angel.

A precious moment, so beautiful Hiram wants it to last forever. Mind-switching the access code he received from Novalis that morning, he Point-finds his way into the network, enters his own mathacker's code to avoid leaving any trace, puts the lift off line, disconnects the alarm bell and all links to the security systems. Total duration of the action: less than a second. When you have the keys to the network, mathacking is just too easy.

The lift has stopped. It's like they're floating in the air, with Virginia and Teyani. So special that no one even thinks of trying to call security.

The Panther imperceptibly raises the corner of her lip, as if she knows exactly what Hiram is up to.

But it's all right, Teyani doesn't mind, it allows her to bless all of them in the lift, distil White Eagle supervitamins into their hearts. Give them the strength to get through another day of war.

Infinite peace of the River of Remembrance.

It flows, from eternity to eternity.

An aeon later, when seven RR seconds have passed, the presence starts fading. Hiram restarts the lift, restores the links to the security system.

The Panther is still looking in his eyes.

But now it's different. There's complicity between them. More has been said than words could have expressed.

Arriving at level 32, she takes his arm again and walks out with him, "Something else I want you to know. I have never met anyone who reminded me of my daughter as you do. Yesterday in my office I could hardly believe it! Virginia's presence was so..." when she realises how moved he is, she interrupts herself. "Are you all right?"

Hiram is about to faint.

And what if Virginia's presence was *really* Virginia's presence?

With all my heart, with all my mind...

What if it wasn't a dream? What if Virginia *really* was at the other end of the presence?

Haven't you known this right from the beginning?

There is knowing and knowing. RR is so foreign to dreams.

I have always known. I have always loved you.

They have arrived at La Coupole. It's a transparent dome, fifty metres long and at least twenty metres high. A large restaurant-bar where people come and sit under the stars. This morning, it's mostly empty. The Panther and Hiram sit at a table right under the centre of the dome.

I left my keys at No Limits.

A waiter comes to them immediately. The Panther doesn't look at the menu, she just orders, "Enchilada with hot chilli sauce." And to Hiram, "I recommend it."

"Rose lhassi and a couple of rashagullas," Hiram orders.

"Sorry sir, we don't have any Indian food."

Hiram grabs the menu, speed-reads through it and orders, "A large glass of water, no ice."

After the waiter has gone the Panther asks, "Do you like Indian food?"

"No," he says. "Listen, I *must* ask you a question."

"Hunh hunh! If it's about the discussion you just had with Serah and Marek, don't even think about it. The topic must *never* be mentioned in public places. Even empty public places."

"Can we go back to your office?"

She raises her voice, "No!" Then, more gently, "If I brought you here it's precisely because I want you to think about something else for a while. La Coupole is my favourite place on MS7. I want you to look at the stars and enjoy them, understood?"

"Yes, Commander." Hiram immediately looks up, watching a Venus-Jupiter conjunction on a Milky Way background, while a squadron of Scalene 296s is making its way back to docking station 1.

After a moment of silent contemplation, she asks, "You've never been to No Limits, have you?"

The knights' meeting place. Nothing short of a legend.

"I can't go to No Limits. I haven't graduated as a knight yet," he says, not looking down.

"If you join the Molten Stars, let me warn you, there will be wild celebrations at No Limits. The chiefs of the Grand Council will have no choice but to let you in."

"How many people in the Molten Star choir?"

"Two."

"I see. Have they never tried to enrol new pilots since the 3rd battle of Mercury?"

"A few times. But it's been a while."

"Must be an envied position to fly with two colonels," he nods, watching the constellation of Sagittarius.

"Especially those two. And you're happy to piss them off by saying no, aren't you?"

Hiram turns his gaze to Virgo. "I don't like being chained. I thought it was the beast that chained people. Not the knights."

"Hiram!"

"Yes?" he keeps contemplating the stars.

"Hiram, look at me!"

When he looks down, she plunges her fiery gaze into his, "Hiram, I love Serah... more than you can imagine!"

Boy, does she mean it!

She goes on, "But if Serah decided to leave the Philadelphian Air Force, I wouldn't hesitate one second to order his death. If I had to, I would even kill him myself!"

Stunned, Hiram watches her while the waiter is bringing her plate and his glass.

She takes her laser-knife and fork, starts cutting into the enchilada with a grin, "And then I'd probably go and kill myself. I can't see I'd be much use to the Philadelphian Air Force after that. Want to try some of my enchilada?"

"Uh... no," Refraining from trembling, Hiram drinks some water, wondering if Virginia has the same temperament.

What has just been said answers one of his questions. Virginia is *not* a descender. They wouldn't have let her fall into the hands of the Rex alive.

There's some heavy cogitation going on in Hiram's rapidly mutating cortical cells. But why does the Panther speak to him as if he were a friend? Why does she want him in Molten Star? He looks for an answer in her eyes.

She seems to have a superb appetite. Between two chunks of the huge enchilada, she answers him, amused, "So tell me again... why did you choose the P-21 as your topic of research?"

"Uh..."

3.17 Monday 09:32 (ETA 89.6 hours)

Back in her office, she tells him, "You have 15 minutes to ask me all the questions you want."

He begins without hesitation, "Are you a descender?"

"No, I'm not."

"So descenders can be married to non-descenders, is that right?"

"Well... yes, of course!"

"And could you have a child with a descender? I mean, could a non-descender have a child with a descender?"

"That we don't know. No descender has procreated yet."

So Virginia and Hiram could be the first ones. No doubt, Eleonor would be thrilled at the prospect of becoming the godmother of the first baby ever born with open DNA. But then what if the baby turned out to be a monster? A round

mass of flesh with unformed limbs, covered in hair and filthy secretions. Virginia's grief would be abysmal. And it would be Hiram's fault, entirely.

Holding her chin in her hand, "Why do you ask me that, exactly?"

"I want to know everything! How many descenders are there?"

"That's classified. I don't even know myself. They're mainly on Philadelphia 12 but you won't have much difficulty recognising a few of them around here. Just look at their Point!"

"When did Serah and Elchevarra go through the descent?"

"Six years ago."

"And what happened to them? What changes did they undergo?"

"That you will have to ask them!" she says. "Anyway, haven't you spent quite some time with Szar's virtual emanation? He must have told you about his initiation with the Sons of the Dragon in Atlantis?"

"Mount Lohrzen? Many times."

"That was a descent process too! Different method, and different forces at play. But as part of the initiation into the Dragon, their DNA was open."

Far Underworld!

So is *this* what the Sons of the Dragon were up to?

It opens a completely different vision of the Atlantean legend.

"Does this mean... I could get huge muscles like Szar's?"

The idea makes her chuckle, "If it's what you cherish, why not? The general principle for descenders is: *You become what you love*. The things that matter to your heart mould your DNA."

"But why didn't anyone tell me that?"

"Mat Donohoo was your descent instructor. From what I can judge, he taught you well. For a start he managed to keep you alive! The odds were not exactly in your favour, you realise? Then Mat was with you at every single critical mutation phase. He monitored every single unit you studied..! You simply have no idea how much work he has put into you."

"But why didn't he..."

"Hiram! Now *I* am your descent instructor and I must warn you... unlike Mat Donohoo, my patience has its limits."

He's always known that: when she gets angry, she must be terrifying.

"All right! I'll stop complaining."

Looking straight into his eyes, "Are you in?"

"I don't know. I need time to think."

"There is no time, Hiram! It's now 09:42. At 13:10, you are scheduled to meet with High Command. Meanwhile, you are supposed to have debriefed Serah, Marek and me about the P-21. If you have a brilliant concept to liberate Philadelphia 6, you had better let us know right now, because in the coming days there's going to be some heavy action around there. In the last 24 hours, the infamous stocking has doubled in width again. The Rex's armada will be here in 89 hours."

A storm in Hiram's neocortex.

Virginia, I don't think my lobsters could ever replace you.

Virginia, Virginia... do you still love me?

No response. But the Panther immediately notices Virginia's presence. She stops talking, watching Hiram with intense curiosity, wondering what the White Eagle he is doing to bring her daughter's presence into the room in such an incredibly tangible way.

Hiram knows he is being Point-scanned. He doesn't care. There is too much at stake. He *must* turn to the presence.

Virginia, they have lied to me, betrayed me, chained me. I will never trust them again.

But regardless of whether they have turned me into a monster, regardless of whether I have lost you, regardless of whether you will ever love me, today I surrender to you. Unconditionally. Totally.

One-way love. You never have to give anything back.

Perhaps you won't even look at me. Perhaps you will find me ugly, repugnant. Perhaps I will find you in someone else's arms, married, happy, fulfilled.

Regardless, Virginia, regardless... The mathematical sky is my witness, I am on my way!

From the archetype of all archetypes, the White Eagle rejoices,

Edge of Highness. Whiteness eternal. Forever love.

And from distant spaces, the familiar whisper,

With all my mind, with all my heart,

I am with you, even when I am far away.

3.18 Monday 13:10 (ETA 85.9 hours) Codename: Reunion

The neurocybernetic institute's briefing hall is a sober hexagonal space with blank walls and a long oval table in the middle. Presiding at the table, Fleet Admiral Lavash, commander in chief of all Philadelphian armed forces. By his side, a string of twelve admirals and air force colonels (in the Philadelphian Air Force there are no generals). Surrounding them, the creme de la creme of tactical experts and techno-dickheads. Hiram counts twenty-one of them. To face them, only six members of the neurocybernetic institute, sitting at the other end of the table: Serah, Marek, the Panther, Hiram and two other air force colonels he hasn't met yet. Lining the walls, there are also thirty security guards in white, the colour of the Philadelphian navy. Among them, the lieutenant who arrested Hiram last night. He looks at Hiram with an uncomfortable expression on his face like, what the hell is this dangerous terrorist doing here.

Serah stands up and addresses Lavash, "Admiral, we have tested Lieutenant Elmian's method to control P-21 mines. It fits the one-word summary which CSS Colonel Fr#zer had sent us: magic! I therefore have the immense pleasure of announcing we are now ready to break through the wall of P-21s."

Admiral Lavash slowly claps his hands, looking Hiram in the eyes.

Apart from his fine hands, Admiral Lavash doesn't look like his niece at all. He's a tall bulky bald man in his late fifties with a grumpy mouth and wrinkles everywhere on his face. He doesn't smile at Hiram. It's clear his face wasn't designed to smile.

Hiram rather likes the don't-fuck-with-me look in Lavash's eyes. Lavash is a stubborn asshole of the worst category. That appeals to him.

Meanwhile, the other admirals and their staff are clapping their hands too. But Serah immediately goes on, "I must however warn you that maruding a P-21 isn't a trivial exercise. On MS7, I can only think of a few handfuls of pilots who would qualify for it. I therefore recommend we immediately start training our special task force on Philadelphia 12."

The descenders, of course.

Now the officers are no longer rejoicing and clapping their hands. The admiral who sits on the right of Lavash asks, "Can't you find a simpler way we could teach all of our pilots?"

What a stupid question! While Serah tries to make him understand that if the P-21's model has eluded all maruding efforts for more than ten years it's precisely because it ain't no coloured-beads-on-strings eyeboard for disabled kittens, Hiram calls on Revelation Sky.

He remembers Varga's face at the onset of the 1st battle of Mercury: the face of a man whose rendezvous with destiny has come. It is exactly how Hiram feels now. He is about to present Operation Reunion – his plan to liberate Philadelphia 6. His life achievement.

If the plan is accepted, Hiram and Virginia could meet tomorrow.

It is the hour of God.

Gathering his forces, Hiram calls,

Virginia, Virginia... if I am ever to meet you.

Now is the moment when everything is to be decided.

Help, mathematical sky! Help us!

Now, everything depends on Hiram's ability to convince High Command. Which is why he has rehearsed this presentation dozens of times, not just with Varga and Lee, but also in front of gatherings of top-level tactical experts' clones.

"Admiral, there is much more!" Serah announces, "Lieutenant Elmian has designed a device that could enable us to do nothing less than liberate Philadelphia 6. Let him present his master plan, codenamed 'Reunion'." Serah sits down.

Hiram stands up. "Ladies and gentlemen let me introduce you to the Rex's new, secret weapon," on one side of the room he projects a VR holograph of the inside of a P-21 upon which is superimposed an extraordinarily complex superastral model with fast-moving luminous shapes. "What is in front of your eyes is the most dangerous space mine ever designed. It is totally undetectable by long range scanners. And as soon as a ship locks its short-range scanner onto it, the mine takes over the ship and starts drawing it to itself, ineluctably. In other words, the first call of the siren is lethal. And this is but one of the mines' capabilities." At the other end of the room, Hiram conjures up the representation of a minefield, "The mines' major strength lies in their social organisation, which by far supersedes that of the P-21s. Seen from outside, the mines behave as if they were constantly talking to each other. One mine can

influence, it seems, thousands of other ones, regardless of distance. And yet, as with the P-21s, there is no communication system linking the mines. Their macro-behaviour is entirely regulated by hypersynchronic algorithms. Now you may be wondering, when is this mine going to hit our skies?" He stops for one second to check that his audience is horrified enough, then delivers the blow, "The frightening answer is: the mine is already here! There are 240,364 of them around Philadelphia 6, and some 920 million lining the infamous stocking." "This mine is not a P-22, it is a P-21 with nothing more than a software upgrade."

Around the oval table, there are many livid faces.

Air Force Colonel MacGuirk – the grand commander of the order of the knights – immediately questions, "Where does this information come from? Did the CSS spy this upgrade?"

Smiting from Revelation Sky, "No the upgrade wasn't spied, I wrote it. A 3D projection of the expected new superastral model is right in front of your eyes."

Waves of whispers throughout the room like, is this really happening in RR?

"All preliminary tests confirm this, Colonel!" Serah backs the claim. "When Elmian's new software is introduced in our P-21 models, the simulated mine field dramatically alters its behaviour. It becomes infinitely smarter."

"But how do we know that the Rex's scientists have written such an upgrade?" MacGuirk asks.

"All the theoretical foundations needed to write the upgrade are already contained in the original software of the P-21," Hiram answers. "It would be unthinkable for someone as intelligent as our enemy not to go one step further and push his hardware to its full capabilities. The advantages of delivering the versions incrementally are obvious. When the upgrade is released, the P-21 will acquire a completely different superastral model. My present maruding solution will become useless, and all our pilots will have to be retrained. But now let me show you something else. Codename: Reunion." Hiram conjures up a holograph of Philadelphia 6, surrounded by its circular wall of P-21s, except at the remote end which opens into the infamous stocking. Coming from the back of the room, a fleet of 400 Scalene fighters and 36 battle cruisers are on their way to Philadelphia 6. "First a few words of background. The general philosophy of A^&~-driven weapons is: flexible hardware, top-level software. What makes a P-21, really? There is nothing extraordinary about the hardware, apart from its ability to adapt to different software designs." Behind him, Hiram conjures up a virtual panel filled with fast-scrolling A^&~ code. "We can turn this to our advantage and use a Scalene 245 or 333 to simulate P-21 signals. Now, watch this!"

The fleet of Scalene fighters has reached the wall of P-21s. Forty fighters are maruding their way through it, while the other 360 wait outside.

"Now, surprise! We are inside the wall, and we make the P-21s believe that the new version of the software is being released. The mines' social behaviour is suddenly altered." As Hiram speaks, an opening is gradually appearing in the

wall of P-21s, while at the other end the mines are closing in. "Philadelphia 6 is being isolated from the stocking."

In the holographic representation of the battle, the Scalenes inside the wall are being attacked by a cloud of Z-99 fighters, while the Philadelphian battle cruisers and the rest of the Scalene fleet are penetrating the newly formed hole.

"Wait a minute!" MacGuirk calls, "At that stage, what would prevent the Rex's generals from blowing up Philadelphia 6?"

"By that stage the enemy will already have understood we are in possession of the upgrade. The enemy will therefore know that, drawing from the full capability of the P-21, we wouldn't have any difficulty turning the explosion of Philadelphia 6 into a chain reaction that would destroy the entire infamous stocking – a huge bang all the way to the blockade. Knowing the amount of hardware the Rex has concentrated in the stocking, the prospect is highly unlikely."

Out of the 36 battle cruisers, 9 have been destroyed by Big Alfredo missiles coming from the stocking. The missiles managed to pass through the closing wall of P-21s at the last moment. While the Scalene fighters are engaging the Z-99s, the battle cruisers are landing on Philadelphia 6, launching commandos into the station.

Philadelphia 6 is being liberated.

There's a stupefied silence in the room.

A techno-dickhead questions, "But what if the Rex scientists knew nothing about this 'software upgrade'?"

Hiram grins, "I am afraid you are grossly underestimating the enemy." He locks a glacial gaze onto the guy, "The enemy doesn't improvise. The enemy doesn't make discoveries by chance. The enemy has already planned the entire range of hardware he is going to serve up to you in the coming twenty years." Said with perfect assurance, so coldly that the techno-dickhead swallows, his chest turned into a refrigeration unit.

"Serah!" Lavash barks, "Do you believe this can work?"

Serah begins with a cautious answer, "Preliminary tests are all confirming that Elmian's upgrade can take over the mine field. We are now testing..." he interrupts himself, looks straight into Lavash, calls upon the power of his lineage. "Yes, I believe it can work!"

For the first time in 13,000 years, Serah who is Szar, Master of Thunder, *really* believes there is a way Philadelphia 6 can be saved.

Apocalypse. The time when everything is possible.

No more whispers in the room. A super-charged silence.

Hiram the unstoppable turns to the beloved presence,

Virginia, Virginia... I am on my way!

3.19 Monday 14:55 (ETA 84.1 hours) Crime and punishment

Coming out of the briefing room, Hiram goes straight to the office of Patricia Elchevarra. Finding the door open, he walks in. "Hello P@! I brought you a present."

The young woman with the ridiculous ponytail is busy doing readings on a white mouse in a cage. She turns round, holding a hand-scanner, "A present? Come in! Did I do something to deserve a present?"

"Oh no!" Hiram immediately answers, raising both hands. "But as you and I now have the same instructor, I thought I'd give you a present."

She frowns in surprise. "Did the Panther tell you that?"

"No, I was just testing you. Now, I know we have the same instructor."

She grabs an empty cage from a shelf and throws it at him. "Get out of here!"

He quickly ducks to the left, dodging the metallic cage that noisily lands in the corridor. Then he turns on his heel, "All right, bye!"

"Wait! What about my present?"

He turns back, "If you still want it, I'd love to give it to you! It's a piece of software I wrote. Computer! Download Multi-V into a temporary account named Present For P@." He explains, "Multi-V can split your VR into up to 55 simultaneous channels. I think you'll like the Point-feel of it."

"Fantastic! I've been looking for a prog like this! Could never find a really good one."

"Feel free to give it to all your friends. Tell me, there's something I wanted to ask you. The Elchevarra with the big moustache, is he your daddy?"

"Marek? Never! He's my brother."

"You mean... your biological brother?"

"Abso-*lu*-tely!" she says, proudly. "Same mother, same father, only seventeen years difference. Mom is a strong woman. In our family, people rarely die before ninety."

"I see. Well, thanks for telling me. Okay, I gotta do some work, bye," he waves, on his way out.

"Wait! Want a cup of tea and a couple of biscuits?"

He is already walking up the corridor, "Another time perhaps."

Arriving home, on channel 1 he finds Eleonor in the company of Szar, Varga, Lee, and Shankar.

"Are we having some kind of family meeting?" he asks.

Eleonor takes the role of spokesperson, "We have things to tell you. We have conducted a thorough investigation of the chip's influence on our behaviour, running comparisons with other clones of ourselves when run by other people. Before you finalise your decision to leave the knights, we want you to know it's not what you think. The chip's influence was quite positive..."

"But I'm no longer leaving. I mean, not right now. Serah and his friend Marek have invited me to join their choir. I didn't say yes but I said all right, I'll give it a go for a day or two, and we'll take it from there," he says, cool, while invoking his full mathacker's arsenal on channel 7.

"You're going to be flying with two colonels?" Eleonor' eyes open wide with motherly pride.

"And I'm a lieutenant, now!"

"We can see that!" Varga had immediately noticed the silver star on Hiram's chest.

Transported with joy, the whole family claps their hands, and there follows a barrage of questions. Meanwhile on channel 7, Hiram calls, "Computer, locate the private quarters of Commander Elyani Serah, flight alias Black Panther, and Colonel Philip Serah, flight alias White Eagle."

"Cabin 11B2013," the computer answers, displaying a map of MS7's level 11 and highlighting the requested location with a flashing green light. The Panther and Serah share the same cabin.

Suspecting mischief, Eleonor clones herself into channel 7, "Hum... what are you doing at the moment?"

"You don' wanna know!" On channel 1, "I'll be back soon for a full report on your findings. See ya, folks."

RR Hiram rushes out of the cabin, starts running to the closest lift.

While running, he mindswitches a full diagnostic test on the firewall of cabin door 11B2013. It's a relatively simple device but to avoid taking any risk, Hiram uses brute force. On MS7, Philadelphia 21, Philadelphia 24, Science Station B13 and Philadelphia 12, massive computer resources are being diverted into finding the key to the Panther's bedroom. The code is no match for so much cybernetic muscle. In the lift, the computer sends the answer in an AR channel that Hiram only can hear, "To enter cabin 11B2013, only an access code is needed. Access code is: #THATWEMAYFLYTOGETHER."

Too easy. Makes Hiram's anxiety worse. Much worse. While the lift is stopping at level 7, then 8, then 9... people coming in and out, there's a voice running in the back of his mind. Not the voice of his conscience, of course! Just a self-reminder that breaking into the cabin of a colonel could get him into fucking trouble.

If he gets caught and arrested, then who will take care of Virginia?

Mathematical sky, be with me!

Arriving on level 11, he runs along the corridors. It's a quiet residential area with smooth beige carpet on the floor and not many people to-and-froing. Hiram's mathacker's software is scanning the heart of MS7's security system, erasing all records of his presence in the lift, and checking that no security fuckwit has locked onto him.

All clear.

Hiram is out of breath. In RR he isn't used to running. Makes him feel nauseated, like his last fill of proto-puree is trying to force its way to the surface in the wrong direction. The voice at the back of his mind warns, "Whatever you do, don't puke in their cabin."

Now he is running down a narrow, empty corridor.

Virginia, Virginia... I love you.

Teyani, wise woman,

Please bewitch High Command into accepting my plan.

Only one more corridor, and that's it.

Running even faster, burping loud. A familiar after-taste of proto-puree in his mouth. Turning left... here we are!

Ah shit! What's this old bitch doing here?

The old woman smiles at him, "Hello, how are you?"

Kindly smiling back, "Hello how are you."

Teyani, please! Please! Get her to walk faster.

She must be at least sixty years old, perhaps even more. Beyond the influence of Teyani's magic. She walks slow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ly. For the Almighty's sake, why don't people like her commit suicide?

Teyani, please! Please!

After a dozen aeons, the walking antique finally vanishes into another corridor. Hiram rushes to the Panther's door, closes his eyes and invokes. "Access code: #THATWEMAYFLYTOGETHER."

No response.

"Computer, why the fuck doesn't the access code unlock the door? Run full battery of diagnostic tests KK909."

Answer, "Diagnostic tests KK909 show the door of cabin 11B2013 was left unlocked."

"What?" Opening his eyes, Hiram realises that the light above the cabin door is green. "Computer, is anyone inside?"

"Negative."

All this brute force for nothing! Hiram sighs, mindswitching the door open and walking into an AR pine forest with an amazing presence. Must be an Archive prog. But there's no time to look around, "Computer, locate hairbrush!"

A holographic trail appears. Hiram follows it, walking with extreme caution so as not to make a mess.

It looks like a big room, much more than 3 by 3, but the AR forest is done so well that you can't tell for sure. Each time Hiram takes a step, all traces of his former step are erased from the floor by the room's self-cleaning system, thanks to a CSS widget called Trespassing Help for Unauthorised Generic Searches. THUGS also filters every single molecule Hiram breathes out, detects and cleans up secretions of various kinds, temporarily puts all local logbooks off line, checks for approaching security personnel.

Crossing a doorway, Hiram arrives in a small room where the holographic trail points to a hairbrush on a small shelf.

It's you-react-you-die, so Hiram doesn't jump with joy. Cool, measured, precise, he examines the hair. It's her hair, no possible doubt: the right length, black with a velvety feel, exquisitely delicate. He extends his hand to grab three pieces but as soon as he touches the hairbrush a light is turned on and a VRR mirror activated. Startled at seeing his own image, Hiram recoils and jumps.

The mirror disappears. Just a computer device. Part of the health and beauty unit. It automatically switches the VRR mirror on each time someone grabs the hairbrush.

THUGS sends a warning signal, "Approaching security personnel. Two of them. Sex: male. Armed with phasers. ETA: 64 seconds."

"Shit!" Hiram pinches the hair and looks for Serah's comb.

"Computer, locate comb!"

"There is no comb in this room."

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Hiram quickly searches the small room, looking for something that could hold some of Serah's hair: also black but shorter, straighter, slightly thicker. No such thing. So what the hell could hold some of Serah's cells?

"ETA: 40 seconds."

"Ah, damn it!" Furious, Hiram has no choice but to retreat. He rapidly walks back into the pine forest, then out into the corridor.

Just in time! He sees the two security guards turning into the corridor.

What matters is, they haven't seen him come out of the cabin.

Hiram walks in the direction of the lift as if nothing was up.

One of the guards gives him a warm smile, "Hello, how are you today?"

Typically Philadelphian! On TS5, they stare at you in a so-what's-your-crime kind of way, even when you're innocent.

Hiram manages to return the smile, "How are you."

Then an uneventful trip back to his cabin.

Opening the door. Coming in. Closing the door. Locking the door. Switching on the red light over the door. Double locking the door with the special security program he has written, codenamed Fort Knox in memory of the only bank he and Sigfr!d never managed to rob.

Then jumping, jubilating, "I did it! I did it! I got the hair!"

On channel 1, the clones are looking at him in deep reprobation.

Eleonor is appalled, "She didn't give it to you, did she?"

"Listen," he warns them, "so much shit has happened since this morning. You have no idea!" he begins a summary.

On channel 22, Math!lda announces, "You have new mail from Colonel Serah."

While invoking Family Traits on channel 12, Hiram watches Serah's message on 22, "Great job, Hiram! Lavash's first response is positive. Right now his staff are going through your plan with a fine-tooth comb." The choice of words brings a grin to Hiram's face. Serah concludes, "Marek and I have been instructed to start training seven choirs of top guns in P-21 maruding. After that, we'll see you on docking station 1 at 17:20. You'll find us in the 333s' area."

Brünnhilde is ready, "What can I do forr you, Herr Bobby?"

In RR, Hiram puts the hair in the gravito-field. "Scan these chromosomes!" he orders on channel 12. "Then recalculate Virginia's models, taking this new material as the mother's genome."

Eleonor turns up on 12, "Did anyone see you?"

"No, no. A perfectly clean job, CSS standards." To reassure her, he clones her on channel 14 and loads THUGS for her to inspect, "Check this! Neat, isn't it?"

"Oh my God! How much I regret I advised you to stay with the CSS!"

Brünnhilde is back, "Ze reszults are eksellent, Herr Bobby!"

A sudden wave of anxiety chokes Hiram's throat.

He turns to Eleonor. "Mom... I'm afraid!"

It does something to her each time he calls her Mom. Her maternal instinct takes over. She becomes a different person.

"I don't know why, I have a bad feeling about this new batch," Hiram says.

"But why?" Eleonor asks. "With such a beautiful mother..."

"It's not just that, it's... do you realise that if my plan were to be accepted by High Command, I could be flying to Philadelphia 6 as early as tomorrow morning. Or tonight, even!"

After thinking about it for so long, Philadelphia 6 is now right in front of him.

"What if I wasn't up to it? What if I wasn't up to her?"

Eleonor speaks with conviction, "I don't give Virginia a week before she falls madly in love with you! Now come on, with cold water it's always better to jump all at once."

He swallows, "Brünnhilde, how many models?"

"Ve now haf 1,479,215 Virginias, Herr Bobby. Featuring 128,662 completely new models vich ver not part off the former lot."

What? 1,479,215 models?

Abysmal disappointment.

Hiram had hoped Family Traits could do much better than that. Quick mental calculation: watching 1 Virginia per second on 10 simultaneous channels (36,000 Vph), it would still take more than 40 hours to view them all.

What to do?

What if tomorrow morning, when he meets Virginia, he weren't able to say, "You are *just* like I thought you were!"

The thought is unbearable.

An option of course could be to use supermind frequencies in order to accelerate the viewing. Tapping from the Point, he could probably reach as high as 20 Virginias per second, i.e. an astounding 72,000 Vph. Pushing it: 55 simultaneous channels at 10 Vps each. The whole 1,479,215 Virginia models could be viewed in 44.82 minutes.

But there's another option. An insidious impulse coming from unclear areas of his psyche, fed by his vilest mathacker's instincts.

It is wrong. He knows that. But he can't resist. It's passion, you see.

Just by seeing his face, Eleonor immediately guesses what he is about to do, "Oh no! Please! Don't do that!"

He shrugs, cynical, "It's the only way. You know it's the only way."

"But you don't have to do it like this! Please! Not against her will! If you asked her she'd give it to you. Why take it from her by force?"

He won't listen. "Computer, access code VIRGINIA#11,867,461 It's the only way!" Hiram repeats with total determination, unleashing his mathacker's routines.

Unless he can catch hold of the images of Virginia taken before the capture of Philadelphia 6, Family traits will never be able to reduce the sampling size to under the million mark.

To crack this access code, he can't use brute force.

There's nothing particularly smart in using brute force. In theory, anyone can do it. The problem is, using unauthorised brute force is a criminal offence punishable by a minimum of five years imprisonment. In all networks, there are layers and layers of protection which instantly detect anyone who logs in and dares try. As a CSS agent, Hiram holds secret keys that allow him to use brute force when needed. But each time he does, all his transactions are recorded and later scrutinised at the CSS headquarters around Neptune. If the CSS were to find out what he is doing now, he'd have to be able to justify his acts with a damn good reason. In the Outer Planets, hacking a personal account is the third worst of all cybernetic crimes, after hacking army secrets and hacking the tax department. In the Philadelphias (a name which means brotherly love), hacking a personal account is *even worse* than hacking the tax department.

"Hiram, please!" Eleonor pleads. "You break into her cabin, it's between you and her. But if you break into her account, then it's between you and the law!"

The computer reports, "Commander Elyani Serah's personal security pin was renewed in the last 12 hours. The new pin code is #FOREVERLOVEWHITEEAGLE."

"I refuse to see that!" outraged, Eleonor switches herself off.

From here it's a simple procedure. Using the pin code, Hiram can locate the Panther's account on the network. He creates an image of it in his own personal account. The file copy utility he uses for this is a piece of art written in A^&~, based on the same principles as the P-21. Totally undetectable. If the Philadelphian cyber-police were capable of detecting this, they'd also be capable of writing the deadly upgrade for the P-21. So Hiram believes. And there's good ground to think he's right.

Sure of his power, Hiram feels cold and resolute. Like the enemy.

The Panther's entire private life is in his hand: every single personal note she made since she was a child, every single VR communication she received – everything! From Trompe l'Oeil decors on the walls to records of bank accounts and menstruation cycles.

"Computer, sort out all visuals of Virginia Serah and download them into Family Traits!" Inhaling a deep breath, "Show the latest VR recording of Virginia Serah."

Right in front of him there's an adorable five-year-old little girl with long brownish dark hair and green eyes, looking neither like her father nor her mother, nor anything he had imagined. But it's irrelevant. What matters is the intensity of Virginia's presence triggered by the vision.

Unvirtual blueness and Eagle's feathers. She's here, in the 3 by 3 cabin. Holding Hiram with her presence.

Virginia, Virginia... wait for me, I am on my way!

This time, I am really *on my way.*

"Brünnhilde, how many models do we have now?"

"Only 98,723, Herr Bobby!"

Grin. At that moment, Hiram knows exactly how the enemy felt the first time the P-21s were tested – an immense wave of power sweeping through his autonomic nervous system.

"Brünnhilde, in this last batch, what is the probability score of the model formerly tagged as #11,867,461?"

"Model #11,867,461 iz no longer a falid solution to our equations, Herr Bobby."

"What?"

Hiram's favourite Virginia, no longer a valid solution?

There must be a mistake.

"Brünnhilde, recalculate! Have you taken into account *everything* that's in the Panther's logbooks?"

"Of kourss, Herr Bobby! And the rizults are the same after rekalkulation."

"No!" he screams, disconnecting Multi-V and collapsing on his RR bed.

Perhaps the only good thing about being a real person is that you can escape virtuality and hide in RR.

"No! No! No!" hitting the RR bed with his RR fist. "I lose my cat! I lose Pen! And now I lose you!"

A woman he loved passionately has just been erased from his life. Worse, even – she never existed! She was never a valid solution, never had any mathematical reality.

Crying, "#11,867,461, I love you! I miss you!"

3.20 Monday 17:11 (ETA 81.9 hours)

In docking station 1, Hiram doesn't have any difficulty finding his fighter. One of the 333s bears his seal, the knights' yellow disk with a wireframe image of Philadelphia 6 inside it and Hiram written underneath. A tradition in the order of the knights: before each mission, the pilot's personal seal is painted on the side of the craft's entrance. However, none of the nearby 333s bears the names White Eagle or Dragon Deeper, Serah's and Marek's flight aliases.

He walks the 26 steps that lead to the fighter's door and lets his retina be scanned by the ID device. If it weren't for the chip behind his shoulder blade, the scanner would immediately trigger all the sirens on MS7. Due to constant mutations, Hiram's retina pattern changes every 20 minutes. But the chip instantly takes over the scanner, and the door of the Scalene opens.

Hiram walks into the familiar flight deck and collapses into the copilot's chair.

The feeling is one of utter devastation. The beautiful #11,867,461 is gone. She'll never come back. Even if she did, it could never be the same. Hiram still hasn't had the courage to look at any of the final 98,723 models. And he can't even go and cry in Eleonor's arms. She refuses to speak to him. Each time he invokes her, she switches herself off.

Serah erupts into the circular room. Hiram jumps up to salute him. Stiff.

"TOP Hiram! Marek can't come, he's busy teaching your maruding tricks to the Montsegur choir. Be seated!" Serah points to the central chair. "Want a copilot? We're going for a ride into training sector 101. Now!"

"Yes, sir!"

Hiram takes position in the central chair. Serah sits on his right.

While Hiram programs the automatic piloting system, Serah tells him, "You made a great impression on Lavash."

"Does this mean the plan is going to be accepted, sir?"

"Don't know. Major problems remain to be solved. By the way, during our choir meetings you can drop the 'sir'!"

Acknowledged with a nod. "What problems?" Hiram asks, setting his highly abnormal brain to high clock-speed.

"We have to find a way to train enough pilots to marude the damn P-21, for a start," Serah says. "The first results aren't very encouraging. As expected, in the first session we conducted only the descenders caught the swing of your model."

"5D visualisations are difficult for the non-mutants," Hiram nods, remembering the hard time he had trying to train R(ou)x and Apax.

As the RR fighter starts gliding its way to the central track of docking station 1 Serah goes on, "Your plan requires a minimum of 120 pilots. After we make it inside the wall, it won't take more than 3 minutes before at least 300 hundred Z-99 fighters come to engage us. Then we'll have to keep you alive for as long as it takes you to open the hole in the wall."

Hiram grins with satisfaction. Comforting to hear Serah speaking of the mission as if it was already scheduled. "I've never worked on it but I *know* there must be a better way of engaging the Z-99s than the maruding technique we're using at the moment. Haven't your descenders worked on it?"

"Yeh, yeh... we have a *much* better technique in reserve," Serah says. "The problem is, the very moment we show it to the Rex, we'll have to start the 5th battle of Mercury. Can't take the risk of letting him sleep on it."

The 333 is flying out of the dock. Fast acceleration. Cruising speed is reached in 21 seconds.

"OK, show me!" Serah engages a simulation program. "How would *you* tackle the Z-99s? There's a squadron right in front of us. ETA 6 minutes. Within scanner range in 120 seconds."

A holograph shows six Z-99 fighters on their way to meet them.

Hiram grins, "You mean 6 Z-99s just for me?"

"Just for you. How many can you shoot?"

"Computer, Multi-V!" Hiram invokes, splitting his reality into six channels. On channel 1, he's sitting with Serah. On each of the other channels, he uses a Varga and a Szar as navigator and copilot.

"What's this Multi-V?" Serah Point-scans the superastral rig.

"Piece of software I wrote."

"Nice feel!"

On channel 2, Varga announces, "Z-99 fighters within short-range scanner range in 30 seconds... 15 seconds... We're locking onto them... now!"

Following the signal of the simulated short-range scanner, it takes less than 20 seconds for Hiram to Point-penetrate the fighters' superastral models. Six superb 4D models made of small shining-black hyperspheres strung like hyper-beads on a 4D fallen angel's necklace. But right on top of them, he can also feel something else: the superastral model of the computer's simulation unit.

"Boom!" he says, manipulating the simulation program, making the six Z-99s explode all at once.

"Hey that's cheating! It would have taken another 3.5 minutes for the Z-99s to get in firing range!" Varga protests on channel 3.

"These simulation programs are such ridiculous toys!" Hiram says in his cold voice, knowing it's exactly what the enemy would say if he could examine them. And also, "They should be rewritten in A^&~!"

Serah nods, thoughtful. No comment.

"So we should be capable of controlling the Z-99s for a few minutes, Hiram concludes and moves on, "What's the next problem?"

"The next problem is that the infamous stocking is packed with ships: 423 Quark-class frigates, 237 Schizo-class destroyers, 125 Aristotle-class carriers, and probably more than 3,000 Z-99 and Z-101 fighters. That's a quarter of all the forces which the Rex has accumulated on this side of the solar system. And of course there's the fleet on its way from Hyper-Earth Link. It won't all go into the stocking, but still."

The enemy is in the fleet. The enemy is coming!

Serah continues, "When operation Reunion is launched, it's likely this hardware is going to come out of the stocking all at once. Your plan would be infinitely more appealing to High Command if it had a provision for blowing up the stocking."

"Mathematically impossible!" Hiram declares in a voice of absolute certitude. "In my paper, I called it the third fatal equation: at the moment of releasing the upgrade, you can't blow up Philadelphia 6 without blowing up the stocking, and you can't blow up the stocking without blowing up Philadelphia 6."

Serah bites his lip, "Sure you couldn't change that equation?"

From Revelation Sky, "It's impossible!"

"I can tell you, at the moment Lavash has every single one of his experts working on this."

"They're wasting their time. Better look for something else, like a fast propulsion device to take Philadelphia 6 away from the stocking."

"All right, change course. We're getting too close to the hot zone. Back to training sector 99," Serah orders. While Hiram is mindswitching the new trajectory, Serah asks, "Do you often fly with Szar as the copilot?"

"Always."

"I see. Now to the third major problem. We're glad you made all these discoveries, but... in the last 10 years, I've had a team of forty-five top-level ex-

perts, seventeen descenders among them, working on maruding problems. And on Philadelphia 12, one of the maruding task forces was entirely devoted to the P-21. We know you're a bright young mathematician, taught by the legendary Mat Donohoo, but still. That doesn't explain why you succeeded where so many of our people failed. We *need* to understand what you have done that the others didn't do."

"Obsession. It's my strength. Your people worked on the P-21. I worked *inside* a P-21. I made it the decor of my cabin. For 2 years I carved code in a P-21, slept in a P-21..." he interrupts himself, thoughtful, then adds, "...everything in a P-21."

"Still, can you see something else that would be different about your method of work? Something no one else did?"

From the Point, "You have something in mind, haven't you?"

"Yes. The Panther and I have noticed, you seem to have the strange ability to bring down people's presences. Have *you* noticed?"

Hesitantly, reluctantly, twisting his mouth, "Oh... do I?"

"Yes. Especially the presence of two people."

Hiram frowns, utterly perplexed, "*Two* people?" Scratching his head, he asks confirmation, "*Two* people?"

"Two people!"

What's this? Is he implying that Virginia has a twin sister, or just trying to test him by throwing nonsense at him?

"Two people," Serah repeats. "One is Virginia Serah. Ever heard of her?"

"Uh... perhaps the Panther... it would have been a while ago... I think she must have mentioned... she said she had... was it?... one daughter... I mean..."

Serah turns towards Hiram and locks an inquisitive gaze into him like, what are you doing with my daughter Lieutenant?

Apoplectic embarrassment. But behind the confusion, there's an immense wave of hope rising in Hiram's heart. Could Virginia's presence *really* be Virginia's presence?

Could there be some meaning in this world?

You left the keys at No Limits.

"Anyway," Serah goes on, turning his fiery gaze elsewhere, "Virginia is not the problem, here. The problem is the other presence. The one you bring down when you speak of 'the enemy'."

Oh, shit!

Hiram is horrified. "Do I do that?"

"You bet you do. At least twelve knights noticed it during your presentation to High Command."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means there *really* is someone who is 'the enemy', as you call him. And as part of your descent process, you must have found a way to plug into his mind."

You've known that for a while, haven't you?

And it explains a hell of a lot. Hiram's talent for writing A^&~ software, for a start.

"But how can you be sure of that?" Hiram questions.

"Hiram, you're a brilliant maruder. But you still have a lot to learn about the power of the Point and psychic warfare."

"But... but do you know who the enemy is?"

"Not completely sure yet, but we might. I've asked the Panther to work with you on this. She'll see you at 21:00. Meantime, I want you to refrain from thinking about 'the enemy'."

"Is there danger?"

"Danger?" Serah laughs. "Hiram, have you ever heard of ancient Archive legends about a master of the dark side called Aphelion?"

The emissary which the Rex sent to tempt the Masters of Thunder.

Mother of the Light! Now *that's* deep shit.

"You... you don't mean to say I have plugged into Aphelion's mind, do you?"

"Hunh hunh!" Serah shakes his head. "We are sure it's not Aphelion. Aphelion doesn't live in a human body, he lives in a mainframe. But the man you plugged into could well be one of Aphelion's disciples."

Oriel, Master of Thunder.

"Enough for the moment. Let's have a quick practice!" Serah decides. "Single reality, Point-paired, flying in two fighters, your lead. Taken?"

Sanctioned with a handclap, "Taken!"

Serah activates a VR simulation that makes him disappear from the copilot's position and reappear in the central chair of another 333.

Point-pairing with Serah for the first time.

He is *so much* like Szar! Nothing unexpected, but still. Hiram bursts out laughing, turning to Szar who has appeared in the copilot's chair. "You did warn me, didn't you?"

Szar is smiling, serene. Looking straight in front of him.

"You and he are one," Hiram realises.

Szar nods. "More than you think!"

A sense of immense freedom, high in Revelation Sky.

The rendezvous with eternity has begun.

3.21 Monday 18:01 (ETA 81 hours)

Back on docking station 1, RR Serah puts his hand on Hiram's left shoulder – it's the Philadelphian custom.

Serah's hand lands in a thick translucent substance which sticks to his fingers. He pulls a face, "What's this shit?"

"Sorry, I must have made a mess with my lhassi," Hiram lies.

"Not to worry!" Serah rubs his fingers against each other, trying to get rid of the gooey substance, and walks off the flight deck, "I gotta rush, three choirs are waiting for me. See you later, Hiram. Thanks for the ride."

"Thank *you*, Colonel!"

Hiram stands up, catching his breath, Revelation Sky still ablaze in his eyes. Feeling slightly dizzy, he walks to the door of the 333 and takes a look at the hangar.

From his high position he sees a Scalene 296 gliding to a position where a small crowd of knights and technical personnel have gathered. They're all clapping their hands. When the pilot comes out of the 296, he raises his right fist. From Point to Point, Hiram *knows* – this man is tuning into Barkhan Seer, paying his respects. The crowd gives him an ovation. When he comes down the steps, they carry him in triumph.

A voice calls, "Do you have that custom on TS5?"

Looking down, Hiram sees Kuan Y!n, Sally by her side. The Himalayans are returning from a mission.

"Watch your step!" Sally immediately shouts.

Amused, he walks down the flight of steps. Carefully. "No, I've never seen that at TS5," he says. He makes sure he stays far enough away from them so they don't put their hands on his shoulder, which would wreck his stratagem.

Gwen turns up. "It's because TS5 is not at war. Yet."

"It's called a 'reception,'" Kuan Y!n explains, watching the happy crowd. "When a pilot does something out of the world, he gets one."

"All your friends come to give you a warm welcome," Sally says. She's in her soft, cuddly white bear character.

"And then you're the king of No Limits. Or the queen, depending. That night, No Limits is subject to your sovereignty: you choose the progs, you attribute the roles. Everyone must do as you say," Gwen fills him in.

"Glad to see you don't always end up in jail when you marude through the ceiling, in this place," Hiram grins. "What's this pilot done?"

"Saved his ass against all odds," Kuan Y!n says.

"He got caught in the hot zone outside the stocking. He managed to come back despite half a dozen Z-99s. Didn't shoot any, though."

So you don't even need to shoot enemy fighters to be a hero. Tells a lot about the current status of the war. Long gone are the days when Varga's squadrons returned home triumphant, scores of Z fighters' carcasses in their trail.

Sally notices the star on Hiram's chest, "Hey, what do I see? But you're a lieutenant!"

"Yeah, kind of."

She takes a step and, taking him by surprise, puts her hand on his shoulder. The right shoulder, thank the Almighty Network Administrator!

The girls clap their hands, apart from Sally who's trying to rub the corrosive, sticky translucent gel off her fingers.

Hiram takes half a step back, hoping no one else will put their hands on him.

"Which brings us to another Philadelphian custom: when a knight gets promoted, he invites his friends out," Gwen informs him.

"I'm starving. How about dinner?" Kuan Y!n suggests.

"We'll bring Zaban," the White Bear gives her most beautiful smile. "And Edith too, of course."

Despite his profound dislike for restaurants, Hiram feels an illogical pull to be in the company of the Himalayans. Not just Edith. Without thinking, he yields, "All right. Want to go to La Coupole?"

Wave of embarrassment.

"Uh... are you aware that La Coupole is the most expensive restaurant of MS7?" Gwen warns him.

"Oh... you see, my superiors promoted me before I arrived here. Now that they've met me, I can't see they'll ever promote me again. So we might as well celebrate. La Coupole, Point-paired, one table, hexagonal formation. ETA 20 minutes. Taken?"

Three simultaneous handclaps, "Taken!"

"TOP, I gotta run!" he salutes them and rushes in the direction of the lifts.

As soon as he returns to his cabin, he red-light-locks the door. From one of his pockets he pulls a small, flat package, tears it open and extracts a sterile spatula. Using the spatula, he scoops the gelatinous substance off his left shoulder, and deposits it into his gravito-field.

The gel is a cell trap. It bites a thin layer off your skin. When Serah put his hand on Hiram's shoulder, he unknowingly made him a gift of a few thousand epidermal cells.

"Computer, read the chromosomes of these skin cells!" Hiram orders. But he isn't holding his breath. He knows very well it's unlikely Family Traits will be able to learn much about Virginia from Serah's mutated chromosomes.

The muffled computer voice begins its report about Colonel Serah, "Species unknown, doesn't match any recorded pattern. There is no y chromosome, leading to the assumption the creature is female. In the absence of..."

"That will do!"

It's about what Hiram expected. Still he *had* to try. Lying in his gravito-field, he lets the medicomputer clean the translucent shit off his shoulders, while taking a leak and thinking deeply.

Where the hell is he going to find a reading of Serah's chromosomes before the descent? The chromosomes which mingled with the Panther's to produce the genome of Hiram's dreams. Of course he could start mathacking the network in quest of intel about the descenders. But that might take time. The descenders are no ordinary techno-dickheads. Even with the power of A^&~, Hiram still hasn't been able to crack the chip programmed by Mat.

Virginia, I want to see you *now*!

He needs the real thing, *now*! Time is running out. Hiram and Virginia could be together as early as tomorrow. Tonight, perhaps?

If he doesn't know what she looks like, how could he tell her, "You are *just* like I thought you were"?

Besides, it will take him a while to recover from the loss of #11,867,461. Even though there are only 98,723 Virginias left, he simply couldn't cope with

getting attached to one of them, only to discover she's the wrong one. It's just too painful to lose the people you love.

An idea! A crazy idea. Normally, Hiram would never have dared. But as his mutant's internal clock is warning him, time is *really* running out. So he invokes, "Computer, send a message. To Colonel Philip Serah, flight alias White Eagle: Thank you for this magnificent flight. I have a favour to ask. As you may know, I'm a bit of a geneticist in my free time. In quest of my new genetic identity, it would help me a lot if you allowed me to see how the chromosomes of descenders have evolved with time. Especially the chromosomes of the three descenders I met so far: you, Marek and Patricia Elchevarra. Thanks for being patient with me. Hiram."

If this doesn't work, then... there'll be no choice left but some very serious mathacking. Makes Hiram shiver with excitement in advance.

I will do whatever it may take to find you.

Nothing, NOTHING will stop me, Virginia.

Rushing out of the cabin, taking the fast lift to level 32.

At La Coupole, he finds the Himalayans watching the stars. They stand up and salute him as if he were a lieutenant.

"TOP, brethren!" he says, just like officers do when they want to be casual. There's an empty chair close to Edith. He sits down, and invites his friends to do the same. Looking up, "These stars are so alive! Such presence. It *must* be an Archive prog."

They burst out laughing. "Hiram!" Kuan Y!n frowns. "But these are *real* stars! The dome is made of transparent carboplex."

"Real stars?" Hiram looks up again, his lower jaw dropped in amazement. He had never thought of looking for RR stars before. Now that he sees them, he is filled with wonder. They speak to his heart. Just like an Archive prog that adds presence to virtuality. "How could I possibly live seventeen years and never watch RR stars?" he sighs.

The Himalayans are no longer laughing, they're watching him, moved by the expression of reverence on his face. There's something disarming about his innocence.

He smiles at them like a child who's just made yet another discovery. With them he feels totally at ease. The strongest sense of belonging he has ever experienced with RR people.

Contemplating the starry dome again, Hiram is struck by a deep wave of sorrow. It's going to take some time before he can forget #11,867,461. She was such a magnificent creature! And she reminded him so much of her mother.

From the Point, Kuan Y!n guesses his distress. "Are you all right?" she places a warm hand on his shoulder.

With friends, why hide? "I've just lost someone who was very dear to me," he says.

"A pilot?" Sally asks. "Which choir?"

"No, not a pilot. Just a friend. But someone special."

The Himalayans know only too well what it is to lose friends. Under the table Edith takes Hiram's hand. The others hold the space, stargazing with him in silence.

When the waiter brings the menus, Sally asks, "What's good here?"

"Enchilada with chilli sauce. I recommend it," Hiram says.

Sally goes for it. Edith and Kuan Y!n follow. Zaban and Gwen go for a plankton-protoseafood mix. Hiram orders a glass of water without ice. His friends think it's because he is too sad to eat.

"So we've lost you. You've gone to fly with the legends," Gwen engages the conversation.

"I think the legends only need me for one mission," Hiram says. "In a few days, when the legends dump me, I hope I'll be allowed to return to the Himalayans."

"We're flattered, Lieutenant," White Bear nods.

"Try to stay alive in the meantime!" Kuan Y!n says sharply, like she's giving him an order. "Staying alive is something the Molten Star pilots have never been good at. Apart from the two indestructible colonels, of course."

"The indestructible colonels, is this what they are called?" Hiram smiles affectionately. The nickname appeals to his damn stubborn bastard side.

"It's actually Marek Elchevarra who's called the indestructible," Gwen rectifies. "Rightly so! No living pilot has more enemy casualties on his record than him: 121 Z fighters! Add to it all the hardware the Molten Stars destroyed during the 3rd battle of Mercury, and the mind boggles. Elchevarra also survived being shot down three times, including one that left him with third-degree burns to 70% of his body. And in a battle cruiser, he survived an explosion that left the entire crew dead. Twice captured by the enemy, twice escaped within 24 hours, circumstances classified. Last time was during the 4th battle of Mercury. The Aristotle carrier in which he was held exploded 5 minutes after he took off. When asked by the news networks how the hell he had managed to get out of there, he just said, 'A space capsule and a paddle!'"

Sally lovingly pats Zaban's cheek. "You like that, don't you?"

Eyes fixed on the horizon, the knight with the curly locks and the black headband briefly lifts the corner of his lips. It's the second time tonight, he must be in a specially good mood.

"Elchevarra and Zaban like each other," Sally adds. "During our graduation night at No Limits, Elchevarra came and stood right in front Zaban, and the two of them looked at each other without saying a word for at least 30 seconds. Then Elchevarra pulled a kind of face and pointed his finger at Zaban, 'You,' he said, 'are going to become a tough knight!' And he went, without saying any more. But later on that night he invited Zaban to Dragon-dance with him."

"Dragon dance?" Hiram doesn't hide his stupefaction. "You mean Dragon dance as in the Archive legends of Mount Lohrzen and the Sons of the Dragon?"

"Darling," Kuan Y!n puts her hand on Hiram's shoulder, "you have *no idea* the kinds of things that happen at No Limits!"

3.22 Monday 20:59 (ETA 78.1 hours) Tomorrow's weapons

When Hiram arrives in the Panther's small office, he finds her in the company of an old woman with luminous grey eyes. "This is Ms X," the Panther just says. And she immediately orders, "When you go out of this room, you have never met Ms X. You don't even remember she exists. Understood?"

"Understood, Commander!" Hiram says, furtively glancing at Ms X, consumed with curiosity. She's not dressed like a knight, she wears a white dress with thirty-one buttons, and her hair is covered with a white scarf. She would be at least sixty-five, perhaps even worse. Her forehead is exaggeratedly high. Tranquil air of authority, like it's been a long time since someone dared say no to her.

The Panther and Hiram sit face to face, establishing eye contact. Ms X sits behind them. At first Hiram finds it rather uncomfortable to sit with the state secret behind his back, but he soon stops worrying, mesmerised by the Panther. She looks like she's just been through a heavy day. It reinforces the nascent lines on her forehead. But she's still the most beautiful woman in the galaxy. Hiram looks at her with such true devotion and awe that she can't refrain from smiling, which is kind of embarrassing, but heart-warming at the same time.

"Come on, show us how you bring down a presence," she says.

Hiram calls on Teyani of the White Eagle. Here she shines, pouring her love into the Panther who is very tired from yet another day of war – much more tired than Hiram had realised.

Hiram can see, there's complicity between Teyani and the Panther. The connection is joyful, easy, light... until Hiram is struck by lightning-guilt and the bliss of WTC vanishes, replaced by an anxiety attack.

What kind of motherfucker is he? At 15:19 he breaks into her cabin. At 16:06, he mathacks her private account. Now at 21:04, he is sitting in front of her, all honey, protectively drawing light from Teyani's spiritual heights for her. Teyani tries to let him feel that RR life does things like this to people, and that from the moment one lands in the RR universe one stops being an angel, it's well known, actually. But he won't listen. Now that he is psychically exposed, it's just a matter of seconds before the Panther finds out his crime. And then... the mathematical sky have mercy on him!

Ms X breaks the silence, "Elyani, would you please explain to this young man that you and I aren't going to eat him?" She gets up, moves her seat and takes position by Hiram's side. Now that he can see her face, it's even worse.

The Panther deftly asks, "Hiram, tell me about the enemy. What kind of man is he?"

Magnanimous soul! Sublime creature! She knows he is in distress, so she immediately lays an escape path in front of him.

Oh, Virginia! Virginia, how right I was to fall in love with you!

The Panther frowns, "Is *this* the presence of the enemy?"

"No! Of course, not!" Hiram swiftly reassures her. "Now, the enemy... the enemy is cold and precise. Exactingness is one of his cardinal strengths. He

leaves nothing to chance. He prepares for every single possible eventuality. Always."

"Tell me more about the enemy's strong points."

"Intelligence. The enemy is an exceptional mathematician. Which is why he has chosen the A^&~ language to write his software. Incidentally, I think he has a leading role in elaboration of A^&~."

A^&~ is presently being reviewed by a task force of 12,000 computer scientists at the Redmond Institute for Supercomputing. Their purpose: integrate A^&~ with the latest developments in hypersynchronicity.

"What was this?" the Panther asks.

"Just an intuition. See, when my virtual tutors first introduced me to the mathematical foundations of hyperlogic, they taught me that the Rex's scientists were way behind us when it came to hypersynchronicity. Nonsense!" Hiram hardens his voice, "Even in the new theorems I have recently introduced to correct the mistakes in Simon's theory, there is nothing that the mathematicians of Hyper-Earth Link haven't already discovered."

Which goes completely against the reassuring beliefs of Philadelphian scientists.

"How can you be sure of this?"

Idiots. No wonder they are losing the war!

"I just know it!" Hiram shrugs. "But if you want I could take you step by step into the mathematics behind the P-21 and demonstrate it to you."

"That won't be necessary," she smiles, a touch mischievous. Then, "What else do you think the enemy has invented?"

If she knew, she would be horrified.

"I think I'm starting to get a good view of the enemy's plan for the P-22. But I can't talk about it," he says.

"You can talk about anything in front of Ms X. Even the descenders."

Yet Ms X isn't a descender herself. She doesn't have any of the characteristics in her Point. Actually, Ms X's energy doesn't have any characteristics at all. She appears totally unscannable. Unfathomable.

"All right," Hiram goes on. "See, the thing that amazes people when they observe the P-21s is that each mine knows exactly what all the other mines in the field are doing. And yet there is no detectable form of communication between them. It's uncanny, as if the mines were talking to each other through subspace, that is, beyond our time-space continuum. And beyond the speed of light. When I opened the magic box and uncovered the mathematical foundations behind the P-21's software, I first believed that it was through the use of hypersynchronic algorithms that the mines gave this illusion of subspace communication. Hypersynchronicity is the mathematical art of guessing and anticipating, I thought. Each mine guesses what the others are doing. And seen from outside, it looks like subspace witchcraft. But now I *know* that's not how the enemy sees things. To him, hypersynchronicity is actually the first step towards subspace communication. I think the enemy is just about to find the secret. The P-22 *will* use subspace communication."

Then the good Lord Melchisedek have mercy on the Philadelphias! Nothing, nothing *will be able stop the Rex. From the Sun to Proserpine, the so-called free men will all be on their knees, begging the Rex to spare the lives of their children.*

Ms X intervenes, "Did you inform High Command of these findings?"

"They're not really findings. More like intuitions. I couldn't substantiate them with mathematical facts."

"Doesn't matter. Elyani, I want a VR meeting organised in 45 minutes, cross-linking with Philadelphia 12's special tasks forces," Ms X orders in a tone that leaves no doubt: if Lavash had other plans for the evening, he'll have to cancel them. While the Panther goes to call High Command, Ms X asks Hiram, "What other topics do you think the enemy is working on?"

"Well... it's not difficult to guess! Once they've found the key to subspace, the next step will be warp travelling: breaking the speed of light, moving from one point to another through hyperspace."

Just like Sigfr!d's starships.

The Panther comes back to sit in front of Hiram. "High Command and Philadelphia 12 will VR-link to us at 22:10."

Ms X acknowledges with a nod.

"Your verdict?" the Panther asks her.

"It's Rosher," Ms X answers.

General Rosher.

The Panther nods, like she agrees. Then she asks, "Danger?"

Ms X turns to Hiram, "When did you start feeling the presence of the enemy?"

"It happened gradually, while I was working on the P-21. It has become much clearer over the last few months."

Since Hiram found the stray P-21, deciphered A^&~ language and started writing software with it.

"Do you have any idea what created the link to Rosher in the first place?" Ms X asks.

"I wanted to crack the model of the P-21. I wanted it more than anything else in the world. I worked on it for up to twenty hours a day, every day. I spent the last three years calling for help, praying that my research would be led in the right direction. It must have influenced my descent and plugged me into the enemy's psyche."

Ms X is intrigued. "But why would a 14 year old young man be so fascinated with a space mine?"

Sensing Hiram's embarrassment, the Panther flies to his rescue again. "Hiram fell in love with the P-21, that's all! The mathematics behind the P-21 is extremely beautiful, you know," she tells Ms X, imitating Hiram's voice expressions.

Ms X stifles a smile.

Hiram gulps. But how much does the Panther know, exactly?

Diversion tactics. He asks, "Can you tell me more about this Rosher?"

"General Alexander Rosher, head of the Redmond Institute for Tactical Studies," Ms X answers.

"Believed to be the reincarnation of Oriel, Master of Thunder, who defected to the dark side after being tempted by Aphelion in 4,243 BC, during a life in ancient Persia," the Panther says.

"...and who has been Aphelion's disciple ever since," Ms X adds.

"Hiram is familiar with Szar's clone," the Panther tells her. For Hiram, "In Atlantis, Oriel of the Brown Robe lived during the same period as Szar and I, but in the temple of Lasseera, not Eisraim."

Hiram returns to the Apocalypse, "How can we know if Rosher knows I've been probing his brain?"

"At this stage, we have no way to know," Ms X says, blunt.

"But this is abysmally dangerous!" Hiram finally realises. "What if Rosher had manipulated me right from the start? What if he had fed me the wrong information? What if the stray P-21 had been a setup? It could mean my model is completely false."

What if the invading force reaching Philadelphia 6 was to realise at the last moment that Hiram's 5D model was a hoax?

Grave, the Panther holds Hiram's gaze for a second, then delivers the news, "Colonel Marek Elchevarra has just returned from a reconnaissance mission, exploring more than 300 km of the stocking and Point-tuning into thousands of mines. And..."

Adrenalin flash. "And...?"

"You can keep your PhD, and you are still a lieutenant," the Panther relaxes her grave expression into a half-smile, "Marek's observations confirm your model 100%."

Sigh! But how can people play jokes on each other like that? Not funny.

Anyhow, "So this means I have been able to scan Rosher's mind without him realising?"

"Not necessarily," Ms X says. "It could also mean Rosher has fed you the right information to confuse us. Or that all this is a setup to draw you to him."

Hiram's adrenalin levels are running high, "Do you mean I could be targeted by the dark side?"

"All descenders are prime targets for the Rex," Ms X replies.

"But then the danger is extreme! Rosher is on his way to the Philadelphias, I know. He is in the fleet that will reach the blockade in three days," Hiram informs them. "What if he swamped my consciousness at the last moment and made me do something crazy?"

"Hiram," the Panther puts her delicate hand on his right shoulder, "Rosher is a powerful man. But he is no match for Ms X."

3.23 Monday 23:55 (ETA 75.2 hours) Virginias and Virginia

Hiram returns to his cabin after having been grilled by High Command and the big chiefs of Philadelphia 12 for nearly 90 minutes. An exasperating meeting: each time Hiram wanted to ask a question, the Panther told him to shut up. And at the end, grand-poopah knight MacGuirk advised him to be ready to be

transferred to Philadelphia 12. In which case he might not be able to take part in the liberation expedition.

"If they dare order me to do that, I'll resign!"

There's no Eleonor on channel 1, and that hurts. Can't even blame the Rex for it. Sigh.

On channel 22, Math!lda informs him, "You have new mail from Luke Poisson, Edith Ladiv, Sally P#cal, Colonel Philip Serah, Dr Patricia Elchevarra.

Hiram distributes the messages on 5 simultaneous channels. On 11, Edith invites him to call her back if he can't sleep. On 14, Sally thanks him for dinner, telling with touching sincerity how she hopes he'll join the Himalayans. On 49, Luke is reporting last-minute difficulties that are likely to delay the release of Succulent Crabs. On 7, Serah announces, "Marek's just back from the stocking. Your model is the right one! I thought you'd like to know. As to High Command accepting the plan of operation Reunion, no answer yet, but I'm working on it." On 9, P@ is all smiles, "Hiram, Multi-V is *fantastic*! I love the Point-feel of it," she goes on raving for 38 seconds then casually drops, "As requested by Serah, I enclose 120 chromosomic readings of me, Marek and him in the last twelve years. For your eyes only!"

Oh! My! God!

We got the papa's chromosomes! The last missing bit of puzzle marvellous. There's a virtual Virginia waiting.

High anxiety. "Eleonor, please! I *need* you. Now!"

No response. On channel 1, Eleonor flicked in, assessed the situation and switched herself out, all in less than 10 nanoseconds. The only trace of the visit is the entry left on channel 1's logbook. At least, Eleonor hasn't erased herself from Hiram's library (the clones' way of terminating a friendship).

On channel 7, "Brünnhilde! Take Serah's first chromosome reading from the files on channel 9 and finalise Virginia's computation."

The Teutonic beauty with ridiculously large breasts rejoices, "Ach, ekscellent, Herr Bobby! Eksellent! Done! Ve now haf..."

"Shut up!" Hiram freezes her in pause mode and closes his eyes, preparing himself psychologically.

Urgent need to lie down in the gravito-field and use the toilet unit.

Then reappearing on 7 in VRR (for touch), inhaling a cosmic cycle. Then, cool voice, "Yes Brünnhilde? How many models?" de-freezing the German damsel.

"...27 models, Herr Bobby!"

"Aaaahhhh!" Scream of agony. "No! No! No! How can life be such a bitch to me!"

The blonde Brünnhilde hasn't been programmed to address philosophical questions. She just keeps smiling.

Hiram abandons channel 7 in despair. To forget about his cruel destiny, he throws himself into the study of the document that Luke has attached to his message. It presents *Portunus pelagicus*, the blue swimmer crab originating from the Pacific ocean (which looks so huge that Hiram finds it difficult to

imagine it could be real). *Portunus pelagicus*' most unusual feature is its ovoid flappers at the end of its legs, enabling it to swim. Most RR crabs can't swim. Tinkering with *Portunus pelagicus*' genetic code, Luke has enhanced the natural dusky blue green colour of its shell. When cooked, it now looks deep blue, which makes for colourful platters when mixed with prawns.

Meanwhile, Hiram is doing some hard thinking. There *must* be a solution. To all problems there is a solution. Most of the time.

The problem: if he gets attached to the wrong Virginia, having to dump her later on might prove more than he can cope with. He still hasn't recovered from losing #11,867,461. Can't repeat the same mistake all over again, even if that's what love seems to be about judging by the VR soaps he watched with Eleonor.

An obvious solution: fall in love with the 27 Virginias! All of them.

Disadvantages: 1) terribly time consuming. Can you imagine? Getting to know the 27 women of your life... Even with Multi-V, Hiram might not be able to cope. 2) Inter-channel jealousy between Virginias could turn his life into a virtual nightmare 3) Worse, even: how will he be able to tell RR Virginia, "You are *just* like I thought you were"?

If he can't tell her that, then life isn't worth living.

Option no 1: divide his life into 27 strictly compartmented channels, erase 26 of them as soon as he RR-meets her on Philadelphia 6. Slightly less romantic, though. But then of course, no man is without a past.

The front claws of *Portunus pelagicus*, where most of the meat is, are 100 mil in length. Luke has been remarkably successful in increasing their width, from 25 to 43 mil in diameter. He has also enhanced the swimming flappers so they can now be fried, producing a novel form of chips. Says Elias (who seems to be particularly enthusiastic about this latest development), "A new chip, now *that's* money! No, it is. Piles and piles of money!"

Impulsively, Hiram gives up on the crabs. He returns to channel 7 and orders, "Brünnhilde, show me the 27 phenotypic models computed for age 17.65 years."

"Jawohl Herr Bobby!"

"Oh!" Hiram exclaims with complete amazement when the row of 27 young women wearing the same black dress appears in front of him.

They are so much alike that he can't even tell them apart.

He jumps up with jubilation, clapping his hands, then becomes dead still again, "But... you are *not at all* like I thought you were!"

What is he doing with these strangers?

Disappointment. Dejection. Devastation. #11,867,461 was such a wonderful woman, why go and seek elsewhere? For one second of decisional flutter, Hiram thinks of flunking the lot and returning to his crabs. Then,

With all my mind, with all my heart...

The marvellous presence is with these women.

How can someone who looks so much like a stranger carry a presence that is so familiar?

Perhaps this is how Virginia will feel when she first meets Hiram.

Hiram closes his eyes.

The main lesson of the day is that presences are bridges. There are ugly consequences: the enemy's presence could take over Hiram, lead him to a deeper and blacker abyss than the one in which he was chained before. But there is also an extraordinary promise. Virginia *must* have felt Hiram's presence, just as he felt hers.

Right now, you feel me as I feel you. I know.

Not a hypothesis, an inner certitude. It springs down through Hiram's Point with axiomatic punch. It's already proven in mathematical sky.

Receive my love! Receive my warmth! I want to give you everything.

"Strange!" Hiram's cynical side reflects, "you'd imagine soapy nonsense like this would blur people's clarity of mind." But it doesn't! The presence makes him feel lucid and vast, like galaxies dancing above his head. With joy as only mathematical formulae can express.

Perhaps she is *a Flying Dragon after all.*

Hiram opens his eyes.

Immediate revelation, with apocalyptic certitude – the woman he loves is no. 7 (starting from the left). She is the one on which the presence is focussed. So Point-tangible that Hiram doesn't even bother looking at probability scores. He immediately erases the 26 other Virginias.

Closing his eyes, extending his hand, walking towards her, slowly.

Tonight, I know you know I exist.

Feeling her presence, stopping just in front of her.

Lightly touching her hand. Her arm. Her shoulder. Her throat.

I know you can feel me. Tonight, I am but a dream. Tomorrow I will RR-walk into your life, realise virtuality, and try not to disappoint you.

Frightening to be someone's dream, knowing you'll have to live up to it.

Breathing in for courage, he opens his eyes.

Virginia is just a little taller than him (only one or two centimetres, nothing that a descender can't overcome). Expectedly she has green eyes, as when she was little. But when she was 5 years old, Hiram hadn't noticed how sophisticated the pattern of her iris was. There's depth in her eyes, the presence tells him. The computer has given her thick, long wavy brown hair, not unlike in the VRs of her childhood, but of course that's a guess. She has the same lips as the Panther, and an oval face like hers.

She is as beautiful as her mother.

It makes Hiram burst into tears. Not tears of disappointment. The tears of joy of a free man. Lightly touching her cheek, an immensely liberating realisation,

I love you the way you are. I love you the same now that I see you.

Tonight I know it is you I love, not your mother!

For the first time, it is the truth.

Panther I love you too, but not in the same way.

Virginia isn't reacting to his tears. She doesn't have a personality yet, just presumed inborn psychological dispositions computed from her genome.

Nothing firm and reliable. Should be improved when Hiram adds a list of presumed psychological traumas and experiences to her program.

"I have missed you, missed you!" Taking her hands, "Were you part of the first 33.3 millions models I had calculated?"

"Yes I was."

Closing his eyes one second. The voice doesn't feel completely right, it doesn't exactly fit the presence. Some work needed, here.

"I can't remember seeing you!" he says.

"Yes you did! Last year. The 13th of February at 23 hours 44 minutes 51.8 seconds, on channel 17. I was model 139 of fashion parade no 6038."

Some work needed on conversational skills too.

"Let's not talk. I just want to look at you and feel your presence,"

The keys are waiting for you at No Limits.

Makes Hiram feel terrible to think he saw her but failed to recognise her. The fact it was during a multi-channel fashion parade at 5,000 Vph is no acceptable excuse. His Point should have responded to the presence.

But now I have found you.

Never before has your presence been so strong.

It had always been Hiram's hypothesis that through resonance, contemplating Virginia's real appearance would help intensify the thread of presence.

The hypothesis was right.

"Come on, marvellous woman. There are works to do," he takes her with him to channel 12, where he invokes the holograph of Philadelphia 6. "See this?" he points to the stocking. "If we can find a way to blow it up without blowing *you up*, good Admiral Lavash will immediately approve operation Reunion. I know... it's impossible, I have proven it. But if we have incarnated during the Apocalypse, it's because we are the people who can achieve the impossible."

Meanwhile on channel 13, he invokes, "Access code VIRGINIA #11,867,461. Computer, how many instances of Multi-V have been installed on the network in the last 24 hours?"

Thanks to the A^&~ Trojan horse routine which Hiram has added to his prog before offering it to P@, the computer can calculate, "Fifty-three instances of Multi-V have been installed: eighteen on MS7, thirty-one on Philadelphia 12, four on Philadelphia 8." Which of course does not mean that the total number of descenders is fifty-three. Only that there are *at least* fifty-three descenders. The figure should grow over the coming days, as the Multi-V fad spreads.

Satisfied mathacker's grin, "Thanks, P@!"

3.24 Tuesday 05:05 (ETA 70 hours) Manoeuvres

In the early morning, Hiram takes off from docking station 1 in a Scalene 333. His instructions are to complete at least 20 hours of RR flight in the coming three days. High Command wants to make sure he knows how to behave in a RR Scalene by the time the Rex's invasion fleet reaches the Philadelphias. Serah and Marek are too busy to practise with him, so he is to fly alone, linking

to the Panther who is sitting with MS7's flight controllers, supervising choir missions throughout Philadelphian airspace. But Hiram isn't allowed to go and fly with the Himalayans. He must remain inside the safe training zone in the immediate vicinity of MS7. For obvious reasons, he can't afford to die.

Exciting, in a way, to think the enemy will be within short-scanner range in 70 hours. But Hiram doesn't think about it because Serah, Ms X, Admiral Lavash and Grand Commander MacGuirk all have ordered him not to think about the enemy. Not for the moment. Stupid orders! Suppose four different people command you to think about anything you want *except* the enemy. What does it make you think of? Not the White Eagle, dummies! Furthermore if there was *one* chance of blowing the stocking, it would be by sussing the enemy's brain. With all due respect, no one knows how to fuck up a minefield – be it P-21 or anything else – as well as the enemy.

Oops! No we didn't think about him.

As the Scalene is gaining speed, moving away from MS7, Hiram turns to his copilot, "Szar, I have a big, big, big favour to ask you. The kind of favour I'll owe you for in our next lifetime..."

"About Virginia?" Szar says.

Frowning with surprise, "How did you guess?"

The Master of Thunder grins. So does Colonel Varga in the navigator's chair.

Szar moves on, "Speak, man of the Law!"

"I need to find a personality for my model of Virginia. Without a personality, she's useless. But it has to be a personality that fits her presence."

"Wouldn't it be wiser to limit yourself to eye contact for the moment? You realise we could be with RR Virginia in less than 2 days?"

Does Hiram realise!

"The thought has come to my mind. I want to be fully ready for the eventuality. So I thought... you are a virtual emanation with a remarkable talent for feeling presences. And Virginia's presence, especially. No, you are! I even believe you introduced me to her. And for this I will be immensely grateful, not just throughout this life, in the coming ones too..."

"Speak, man of the Law!"

"Right. I've hacked a link to Philadelphia 12 University's database of psychological sciences. It holds a personality bank for virtual clones with more than 9 trillion base-personalities. The best in the solar system. Think you could pick out a few that would go well with Virginia's presence?"

Szar laughs, "Is that all?"

Hiram takes the answer for a yes. "Well, actually, there's something else. From man to man, I'd like to ask your advice on how to approach Virginia. I don't mean the clone. I mean when we land on Philadelphia 6."

"You don't want my advice on things like this!" Szar hides his head under the hood of his brown gown.

"Oh yes I do! When it comes to the Serah family, few people can give as authoritative an opinion as yours."

"But not on this topic. You're asking the wrong person. With these things, I was totally naive. And anyway I didn't approach Elyani, she approached me."

"Actually, I'd prefer that. What did you do for her to approach you? Was it the power of the Dragon that made it?"

"No, precisely. Elyani was in love with me *before* I was initiated into the Dragon. After I conquered the Dragon, all sorts of people were running after me. But it wasn't me they were interested in, it was the power. Not so of Elyani! She loved me for who I was."

"So what sorts of things did you tell her to get there? Did you invite her for a drink or something?"

"No, *she* made me drink a beverage that put me completely at her mercy."

"Sounds exactly like what I need!" Hiram gives a handclap. "What beverage?"

"Dragon's milk."

"Cool! How do I prepare one for her? Have you got the recipe?"

"Don't even thought-form it! Totally secret. And no need to waste your time, it's not in any database in the solar system."

Intense cogitation. Then, "If my plan works out and Philadelphia 6 is liberated, will you give me the recipe for Dragon's milk?"

Szar gives a handclap, "Deal! But on the exclusive condition that you don't get killed."

Hiram grins, like Elias would be proud of him for such quick, successful negotiation.

Varga intervenes, "Hiram, if you want a woman to love you, the secret is to be yourself, not use other people's tricks. Be spontaneous!" he says in his gentleman's voice.

"I dispute this, Colonel. True, human behaviour isn't easily comprehended by mathematical equations. Still it is governed by laws and patterns reflecting archetypal super-realities. Ignore them at your own risk! Virginia is too important to me, I intend my approach to be fully consistent with the knights' philosophy of marrying age-old lore of consciousness (which is why I am asking Szar) with the latest scientific discoveries."

Gets Varga curious. "How fascinating! Would you give us an example?"

"I'll tell you something that really works. Choose a day when the woman has been a bit shocked, like news of war or something, and get her to do lots of laughing. Then you wait till it's very late at night, you look at her intensely ('s gotta be *virtually* intense) and you tell her, 'Have you ever made love in a bomb?'"

Varga and Szar are laughing their Points off when MS7 calls, "Black Panther to Hiram." The Panther picks up the background noise, "Keeping up the level of joy?"

A principle of the knights' art of warfare: keep up the level of joy, or die! Joy is good for your hormones. Can't win a war without getting your hormones right.

"Hiram to Black Panther. Discussing behavioural psychology."

"Sorry to interrupt. You're about to reach 3 beacons, ETA: 5.5, 7.5 and 8 minutes. Destroy them."

"Hiram to Black Panther. Acknowledged!"

A standard drill. The RR beacons are small pieces of hardware which simulate unknown enemy spacecraft. They don't fire live ammunition, but the virtual damage they inflict will be recorded by the computer of Hiram's Scalene.

The first time Hiram is to shoot a RR target.

On a holograph, the beacons appear. Three cherry-size round balls of light interlinked by a network of flashing lines.

Varga announces, "Short-range scanner will lock on beacon 1 in 30 seconds... 15 seconds... 5 seconds... Locked on!"

Hiram's Point follows the scanner's signal, travelling along the electromagnetic wave till he reaches the beacon.

Point-gearing into the beacon's superastral model. Point-scanning it.

An easy one. A large conglomeration of dancing geometrical shapes, fast moving but all 3D. Offers poor resistance to Point-probing.

Firing two Sting missiles, Point-monitoring the beacon's response to them. Twelve new cone frustums have appeared in the lower left part of the model, revolving on each side of an oscillating sagittal plan.

Point-erasing the cones.

It creates a blind spot in the beacon's detection system. The beacon loses track of the incoming missiles. It's as good as dead.

Hiram's 333 is still out of the beacon's firing range.

Varga announces, "Target 1, destroyed!"

A totally safe manoeuvre. From the Point, Hiram reads the Panther's satisfaction.

"Locking on target 2 and 3 in 30 seconds... 20 seconds... 10 seconds..."

Getting ready by Point-calling on WTC.

Point-above the scene, Master Barkhan Seer's liquid gold.

Master Barkhan Seer is busy unfolding a field of Point-ness, a super-charged net for his knights to connect with and draw from his power. The net covers the entire Philadelphian space on both sides of the orbit of Mercury. It goes as far as the blockade and beyond. A massive field of power.

"5 seconds..."

The liquid gold pours down into Hiram, "Greetings, Hiram, knight of the Apocalypse, formidable weapon in the hand of God!"

"Praise the Great Apollo, Master Barkhan Seer!"

The Great Apollo, patron of the descenders.

"Draw Thunder from my field of Point-ness and be ready, Hiram. The 5th battle of Mercury is about to begin. See!"

Sudden, irresistible upsurge of power in Hiram's Point. Standing up in Spirit and watching the world from Revelation Sky. A flash of all-encompassing vision – 360 degrees. In the Philadelphian space, more than 5,000 ships are moving towards the blockade, taking position to face the onslaught. On the other side of the blockade, the massive invasion army of the Rex. At least

2,000 spacecraft already, with another 7,000 on their way from Hyper-Earth Link. Also on their way, the 2,500 ships coming from the Outer Planets, commanded by Colonel William Perry. Nothing that Hiram hadn't heard in the news, but now it's all laid out in front of his Point-eye. And it is only part of the forces gathered for the battle. Above the scene are gigantic forces of light, ready to clash with no less gigantic powers of darkness. Angels whose stature defies imagination, far beyond even a descender's 5D Promethean vision.

"Locking on the beacons!"

Two insignificant superastral models, one 3D, one 4D.

In Revelation Sky, a being of light smites an anvil with a colossal hammer, smashing the models to pieces while Hiram fires a couple of Sting missiles. Raising both fists, the being of light invokes,

Ha! Gana! Lobatchen Zerah! Hera, Gana! Simayan ho Zerah!

"Target 2, destroyed!"

Only a few hours away, the stocking in which the Rex's admirals have already concentrated most of their armada. And Philadelphia 6.

Virginia is asleep, dreaming.

Trust, marvellous woman. I exist! I am on my way. Light will prevail!

"Target 3, destroyed!"

"Black Panther to Hiram. Perfect score on this drill! But you're coming too close to the edge of the safe training zone. Reverse your course. Aim at zone 21B."

"Hiram to Black Panther. Acknowledged!" The 333 changes direction. "By the way, do I get a maruding score for this?"

"Not really. Same as with White Line: an absolute score can't be evaluated. All I can tell you is that you'd be above the 575 limit."

That's a start. A maruding score of 575 is enough to graduate as a knight. Nothing extraordinary though. Top guns like the Himalayans all score in the seven hundreds or more. And Philip Serah graduated with an astonishing 893.

"Is there such thing as a maruding record? What's the maximum ever scored?" Hiram asks.

"965. Held by the knights of choir Cantor."

965! Leaves Hiram thoughtful.

Through the Point-net, Barkhan Seer's presence reaches down to him, "Your time is coming, Hiram! Draw from Thunder."

Hiram responds by raising his right fist, "Hey, Barkhan Seer!"

High in Revelation Sky, the being of light is still invoking,

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam!

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam!

There is rolling thunder in the net.

An incoming message from a squadron of 333s, "Queen G to Hiram. Greeting from the Himalayans, noble knight!"

"Hiram to Queen G. Greetings, Himalayans! Where are you heading?" he asks Gwen.

"Escorting a Sickle-class battle cruiser who's taking position 1,300 km west of the stocking. We have someone with us who wants to meet you. Want me to plug him into your VR?"

"Plug in, Queen G! My virtuality is yours."

A tall, handsome man appears in Hiram's flight deck. Dark-skinned with slight Indian features, but clear blue eyes, "TOP Hiram! I am Mohan, flight alias Yogiraj." A heart shining like the midday sun in the World to Come.

"Mohan!" Hiram stands up and walks towards him. An instant click, like meeting an old friend. Hiram takes his hands, "Glad to meet you, brother! So you came back from Philadelphia 23?"

"With the fleet on red alert, all pilots have been recalled." Mohan smiles, points his index finger up, "Something big is about to happen up there!"

High up in Revelation sky, lightning bolts flashing out of the mouth of the being of light, *Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam...*

Mohan knows. He too is about to meet his destiny.

A cosmic accomplice's smile, eternity in the twinkling of an eye.

"I'll see you at No Limits!" Mohan takes his leave.

"You won't! I haven't graduated as a knight, yet!"

"Then... I'll see you at No Limits," Mohan winks, and logs off.

In RR, Hiram hasn't moved from his seat. "Such beautiful people in the Philadelphias! Did you see this man's heart?"

Szar's head is no longer covered by the hood. He nods, thoughtful. Something in his Point resonates with Hiram's.

A Point-wave that hits Hiram, makes him close his eyes for a few seconds. Then, "Hiram to Black Panther, protected channel."

"Black Panther to Hiram, protected. Listening."

"Panther, I have a bad feeling about the Himalayans' mission. I know this is none of my business..."

"Here we have a bad feeling too. But there is no way we can cancel the mission. The battle cruiser is urgently needed by a formation of 7 frigates who've just taken position on the outskirts of the stocking."

"Requesting permission to accompany the Himalayans."

"Permission denied, Hiram. You stay in the safe zone. But if the Himalayans want you to, you can Point-pair with them."

Hiram acknowledges and immediately calls, "Hiram to Queen G. Himalayan leader, I request permission to Point-pair with you."

"Queen G to Hiram. See some heavy shit about to fall on us?"

Silence.

"Welcome to the Point-ring, Hiram!" Gwen invites him in, transmitting mission data to his computer. A flight formation holograph appears in Hiram's flight deck: 2 large equilateral triangles superimposed. On each of the angles, the face of one of the pilots: Queen G, top front, Yogiraj bottom front, Cicada-Edith and Zaban on the left, White-Bear-Sally and Kuan Y!n on the right. Sandwiched between the triangles is the 200-metre long battle cruiser Bang-

kok. By its side, the image of a chubby red-cheeked navy officer with 'Captain Alfred Bool' written underneath.

"As soon as we reach the frigates, we should be safe. ETA 3h 22m," Gwen says.

The Point-pairing is immediate. Warm. Fills Hiram's heart with light. Makes him feel he shines like Mohan.

Seven souls, one Point.

Mother of the Light, look after those who haven't denied your name!

White Bear is tired. And afraid. She doesn't know how well she'll hold it if some of her friends are shot down.

Scanning Revelation Sky, looking for an archetypal white bear. Hiram calls, "Teyani, help! No one knows whiteness better than you."

Teyani points to a magnificent creature. A bear running through an icy landscape. "Here she is!" On the edge of a pure lake, bolting on the ice, wild, racing with the winds – the light which inspires Sally.

Connecting for her. From bear to bear. From archetype to Sally.

White Bear is less tired. From the Point, she knows Hiram's love.

In space, above the 6 fighters and the battle cruiser, there's a white bear running and she's wild.

"Panther to Queen G. Long-range scanners are picking up a welcoming party: Z-99 fighters, ETA 13.5 minutes."

A navigational holograph showing 12 dots appears in Hiram's flight deck. And a DAU panel with on the left: Scalene 333: 6, casualties: 0 Sickle cruiser: 1, casualties: 0. On the right: Z-99: 12, casualties: 0.

"Captain Bool to Queen G: my instructions are to let myself be destroyed rather than fire my new phaser cannons. I am only entitled to use conventional weapons."

"Queen G to Bool. Acknowledged."

Hiram pulls a face. "Playing games?"

Varga highlights 24 cannons on the Bangkok's holograph, making them blink. "New weapons. High Command doesn't want to show them to the enemy until the last moment."

What is this new weapon?

Hiram shivers. The enemy is calling him! The first time he notices.

An insistent pull: *What is this new weapon?*

Hiram draws from Thunder in Barkhan Seer's Point-net, expelling the enemy's presence from his consciousness.

"The Himalayans' short-range scanners will hit the Z-99s in 3 minutes," Varga says.

Point-gathering forces.

In Revelation Sky, the invocation goes on, *Nama Gana, Nama Gana...*

On the edge of liquid nothingness, there's a beach, ten times the size of the solar system. Sitting on the sand, a statue of blazing golden light, waves flowing from it. Is it music?

No, it is infinity made sound.

On the beach, Szar who is Serah is dancing, a hyperbolic helmet of golden light on his head. Same helmet as the statue, same light.

"1 minute..."

The statue isn't a statue.

It is a god. Playing music. For Serah's dance.

Descender's dance. For 50,000 years, the Sons of Apollo have prepared for the dance. Now the time has come.

"30 seconds..."

On the beach, Serah extends his hand, "Hiram, dance with me!"

An explosion of joy.

Above the 333s, the white bear is running. Wild.

"5 seconds...

Hiram is dancing on the beach. The universe comes out of the god's music.

"Locked on!"

Point-following the scanner's signal...

Hiram focuses on the Z-99 at the extreme left, Point-locks on its superastral model: 4D, extraordinarily fast moving, showing all the signs of A^&~-driven hardware. Unusual for a Z-99.

Zaban has Point-locked on the same fighter and fired 4 Sting missiles.

Meanwhile, the Z-99s have fired 27 Beth missiles – 27 red flashing lights on the holograph, moving towards the Himalayans. Fast. On the Bangkok, Bool's tactical officers are locking their weapons onto them. Each time a Beth is locked on, it turns grey on the holograph.

The enemy's presence returns.

Would you like me to show you how to destroy all these Z fighters in one go?

Twelve in one go? How could that be possible? Split second of hesitation.

On the beach, dancing Serah warns dancing Hiram, "Don't! Tap from the clear fountain, not from the abyss of darkness."

Zaban is Point-disorganising the Z-99's model, flattening all the curves. But each time he releases his Point-pressure, the model regains its original shape.

"Z-99s will be in firing range in 75 seconds."

Another volley of 27 Beth missiles are on their way. In the other direction, 61 Sting missiles have been shot, more than half of them by the Bangkok.

The first incoming Beths are being intercepted by the Bangkok's fire, their grey shapes disappearing from the holograph.

Come on! Let me show you how to save your friends!

"Black Panther to Hiram, protected channel. Open your VR to an incoming message."

"Hiram to Black Panther. Ready!"

Ms X erupts into Hiram's piloting vault. "Hiram, you are under attack. Rosher is trying to take control of your mind."

Rosher will establish contact with you as soon as he reaches the Philadelphian space. Aren't you his brother?

"I want you to look into my eyes and remember my presence," Ms X orders.

"Should I try to push him away with my Point?"

"Don't try anything. This man is far too powerful for you. Just look into my eyes and let me handle this."

A few seconds of eye contact. Hiram can't read anything on her face, can't feel any particular energy with her. Like facing a closed door.

"That will do," Ms X says in her tranquil voice. "I don't think Rosher will attempt gross manipulations like that again. Right now he is on his knees, screaming with pain from the headache I have inflicted."

Hiram gulps. Boy, can she be scary!

"Make sure you don't call on his presence," she orders. She disappears before Hiram has finished saying, "Yes Ma'am!"

On the field the two parties are hosing each other with missiles. No casualties yet. The Bangkok cleans up the Beths. The Z-99s' models are too tough to let themselves be fooled into not seeing the Stings.

"Z-99s in firing range in 20 seconds..."

The Himalayans need more power.

Dancing Serah is laughing. "Tap from your helmet!"

On the beach, Hiram realises he too is wearing a hyperbolic helmet.

From the helmet, the 360-degree vision, from one apogee of Proserpine's orbit to the other with the Sun in the middle and a little dot which is Philadelphia 6. Philadelphia 6, where Virginia is breathing. Now it is Hiram who is chanting the invocation, *Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam...*

"10 seconds..."

Raising the Himalayans, making them shining stars in Revelation Sky.

Through Hiram, the statue-god looks for one of them to send down a massive upsurge of power. His gaze falls on the running bear.

"In firing range... now!"

The Himalayans break their formation. White Bear takes off straight into the herd of Z dogs, propelled by the Spirit of the statue god. The Z-99s shoot at her, setting her 333 on fire.

For a split second, the DAU says, Scalene 333s: 5, casualties: 1. Then it changes its mind and returns to Scalene 333s: 6, casualties: 0.

Partial damage. Sally isn't dead yet.

Hiram makes himself vast like Revelation Sky, holds its immensity for her, unleashes the full power of the invocation into her Point: *Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana...*

If this doesn't kill her, she will be unstoppable.

In less than 5 seconds, the right side of the DAU registers, "1, 2, 3, 4."

White Bear has just shot down four Z-99 fighters!

"Vacuum!" Queen G shouts. When 30% or more of a squadron of Z-99s are exterminated in less than 20 seconds, it creates a chain-reaction that depresses the superastral models of the remaining ones – a superastral vacuum. From there the Bangkok has no difficulty shooting down 5 of them at once, while Zaban, Edith and Mohan pick off one each.

From red, the space gradually becomes black again, Scorpio in the background.

"Black Panther to Himalayans. All clear! Damage assessment?"

"Queen G to Black Panther: 3 minor hits on the Bangkok, no structural damage. But White Bear's right wing is on fire."

"White Bear to Queen G. Fire is under control. Being extinguished... now!"

Hiram collapses back in his chair, closes his eyes, sighs with immense relief, "Mother of the Light! Mother of the Light, thank you for this."

Long gone are the days when RR engagements were abstract and undiscernible from VR ones.

"Panther to White Bear. Report!"

"A dent in my right wing, 21 phaser cannons off line, right deflector shield off line. There is no other damage. All environmental systems are on line and well."

"Panther to White Bear. Return to MS7. Now. The Himalayans will finish the mission without you. And how are *you*?"

"Feeling high, Panther! High, high... on the shores of the Molten Sea, dancing with Lord Gana."

3.25 Tuesday 10:12 (ETA 64.9 hours) Never lie to me. Never ask me to wait.

On MS7's docking station 1, Hiram watches White Bear's Scalene 333 gliding back to its parking spot. The dent in her right side is at least 15 metres long. Frightening.

There's a reception waiting for her. Hiram quickly counts 114 people: 39 pilots, 41 technicians, 34 civilians. They're clapping their hands, shouting with joy. The Scalene moves slowly enough for them to follow it, running by its side.

When the massive beast stops and the door opens, a radiant White Bear appears, raising her right fist to receive the ovation. She scans the crowd, searching for someone.

She is looking for you.

Is she? Hiram starts running towards the crowd, clapping his hands.

When she sees him, Sally runs down the flight of steps. But her friends catch hold of her and lift her up, carrying her in triumph. Laughing, she tries to extricate herself from the living mass but with no success. She tries to call Hiram, but they are all shouting much louder than her.

Hiram prefers to stay on the periphery. Despite the many shifts he's gone through lately, there's still something intimidating about so many RR people all at once. Anyhow, only one thing counts: Sally is alive.

Hiram finds himself thinking he doesn't give a damn whether the mission has been accomplished or how many enemy fighters have been shot.

The only thing that matters to him is that Sally is alive.

You left your keys at No Limits.

Now the others are safe too, on their way home after delivering the Bangkok. There's nothing faster than a Scalene 333. Missiles can't reach them. Z fighters won't even try to chase them.

He stays away from the crowd, walks to the lifts.

Difficult not to think of how he would feel if the Himalayans had been decimated. Stupid game. There were definitely a number of things that Sigfr!d had missed.

In his cabin, Math!lda announces, "You have priority mail from the Knights' Headquarters."

Hiram plays the message. A knight in his late twenties. Completely bald. A wild look in his eyes. Supernova kind of glow.

A descender with a massive Point.

"TOP Hiram. I'm Commander Gideon of Philadelphia 12 Neurocybernetic Institute. My colleagues and I have been reading your A^&~ manual with immense interest. In the last four years, we have been developing a computer language with a natural affinity for hypersynchronicity, codenamed UBQ. It's come as a bit of a shock to realise how far the Rex's scientists have gone with A^&~. We need to speak to you ASAP. I attach a full documentation on UBQ (classified level 6) and wait for your reply."

A new language based on hypersynchronicity? Sounds even more sexy than Dragon's milk! But Hiram refrains from looking at the attached files, because he no longer trusts himself.

What if the enemy can read his mind?

What if the enemy had already spied on his invasion plan for Philadelphia 6, and a carrier-load of other state secrets?

He directs a high emergency call to the Panther, who immediately appears in front of him. She's with the flight controllers, looking busy.

"I need to speak to you about Rosher," he says.

"I can't for the moment. Too much going on."

"But what if Rosher taps your secrets through me?"

"Ms X considers you clean for the moment. Just don't tune into him. I'll speak to you later." EOC.

Clean for the moment. Until when?

On channel 7, he recalls the virtual panels with the fatal equations. And immediately starts wondering if it's because he spent the entire night thinking of P-21s that the enemy was able to bridge into his mind this morning. Shouting, "How do you want me to work on the minefield without thinking of the enemy? It's impossible!"

The P-21s are like an extension of the enemy's mind.

The enemy, who will be in Philadelphian space in 64 hours.

Szar and Virginia turn up on channel 1. She's still wearing the same black dress but she looks different. Awake.

Oh!

The real thing?

Szar looks grave. "Hiram," he begins in a tone of warning.

"You've done it!" Hiram contemplates the marvellous woman who no longer looks dull and empty but very much like herself. "You found a personality that *truly* matches her presence!"

"Teyani and I did it. But..." There's boundless compassion shining in his eyes, "...we want you to know something. When you meet the real Virginia..."

Selective hearing and passion go together well. Hiram's heart takes a fast lift to WTC, "You mean Teyani said I was going to meet Virginia?"

Szar nods, inhales a long breath. "But you must be prepared. Virginia's soul has been... damaged."

"But I know that! Believe me, I know what the Rex's HR does to people. I have no illusions, I'm ready to pick up a heap and patiently work at putting the bits together."

So much love in Hiram's voice. Makes Szar bite his lip. "Teyani wants you to know she will help."

Hiram the unstoppable raises his right fist, "Hey Teyani!"

Virginia is watching with curiosity.

"You don't look at all damaged to me," Hiram tells her.

"No, this is not how you will find RR Virginia," Szar warns. "This is what she could be like after you heal her. The base-personality of this model hasn't been altered by any of the traumas that RR Virginia went through."

Meaning the RR woman won't have the same spark in her eyes.

Hiram takes Szar aside on channel 17. From Point to Point, "Thank you. To you, and to Teyani."

Szar receives the warmth, responds with warmth, but reminds him, "Archive people don't like to be thanked with words, but with actions."

"Command, Master of Thunder. I will do as you say!"

The over-enthusiasm makes Szar smile. Affectionately. "Just fulfil your destiny," he says.

"Man," Hiram protests, turning both palms skywards, "couldn't you ask for something more reasonable?"

Broadening his smile, Szar's slaps Hiram's shoulder, "I'll be going."

"Wait, I have something to ask you. Does Serah know I now have a true-to-original copy of his daughter?"

Grin. "There's something in your favour: at the moment, Serah is horrendously busy preparing for the 5th battle of Mercury."

"Yeah. Right. But that doesn't answer my question. Does he know?"

Enigmatic smile, just like the statue-god.

The god who is still playing music on the beach where Serah and Hiram are dancing, their Points ablaze with liquid gold.

"There are many facets to knowing," Szar says.

"Here I'm not asking for age-old wisdom, but facts."

"Want a fact?" Szar snaps his fingers, points his index at Hiram's heart, "Right now, Serah is going through one of the most difficult times he's ever had to face – all lives included. If you showed him your model of Virginia, you'd bring a bit of sunshine to his reality. Fact!"

Oh! Death by embarrassment.

Thank God, Szar isn't asking Hiram to do that!

Szar puts his hand on Hiram's shoulder, "I'll see you in the Golden Sun, brother." And he exits in a 3-second gradual fade out.

Returning to channel 1, Hiram contemplates the gift from the World to Come. Personality suits her well. It adds depth to her eyes and her bearing, reinforces her presence. She looks kind of amused, but cautious. Curious at the same time, "Where to start?"

Now her voice sounds right.

Hiram is in an explosively buoyant mood because the computer model of his dreams has finally come to life, because his friend Sally didn't die and neither did any of the Himalayans, and because Teyani of the Fields of Peace has offered him her help. Jokingly, he draws from his devastatingly intense side, "Have you ever made love in a bomb?"

She opens her eyes wide like, who is this dangerous maniac?

"Computer, erase the last 60 seconds from Virginia's memory!"

Personality suits her well. It adds depth to her eyes and her bearing, reinforces her presence. She looks kind of amused, but cautious. Curious at the same time, "Where to start?"

Her voice definitely sounds right.

Hiram contains his explosively buoyant mood. Slowly, he extends his hand towards her hand. She doesn't reciprocate, looks uncomfortable.

He withdraws his hand, "Computer, erase the last 15 seconds."

Hiram stays still, drinking in her presence and letting her look at him.

"I need to understand better," she says.

Welcomingly, "What?"

"The kind of story I've landed in."

"It's safe."

"Safe? According to my data, I am facing a man who learnt genetics, invented new maths theorems worth a PhD, spent 921 hours developing a computer program worth another PhD, committed 3 offences, one of them punishable by 5 years of imprisonment – all of this only to see me. Mind if I'm worried?"

"Hey, but that's totally unfair! Virginia isn't supposed to know these things."

Ironic smile, "For her own safety, it might be better if she did."

"Listen, I object! You're judging me without knowing anything about me."

"I can read computer logbooks, you know," she says.

"Well then it *is* totally unfair. You know everything about me, and I know nothing about you!"

"Interesting to swap roles, isn't it? And please don't manipulate my program. We haven't been together five minutes and you've already played up with my memory twice. I don't like it."

Said without anger, but still, fuck! If that's how she is without being screwed up by abandonment traumas and the Rex's HR filth, then what must her RR counterpart be like! Lucky this is *not* her real personality, just a personality that happens to match her presence.

Hiram breathes deeply, thinking of the White Eagle. "All right. I won't erase your memory again."

"Much appreciated. Now will you tell me what the purpose of the game is? Why am I here?"

"You are here..."

Easy to see, there *are* common points with her mother. Hiram bets the Panther would hate having her short-term memory tampered with by her lover.

"You are here to help me find ways of assisting Virginia when I meet her. Restore a bit of light to her heart. Some joy."

"Sounds noble enough. But what if you weren't the right man for her?"

"I guess it will be up to her to decide that."

"Will it?" She doesn't seem convinced. "You aren't the kind of person who gives up easily."

Proud smile, "You have no i-dea!"

"And you think you can break all the rules. Why would you play by the rules with her? You could mess her up completely."

Boy, does that hurt.

Easy to see she's a computer clone. A real human being could never be so heartless.

Or could she?

One step further in surrender,

Virginia, I love you. Even if you are like this, I love you.

Perhaps that's what love is about. Believing in someone regardless of appearances.

"What you have done to the Panther... isn't very nice," she says.

"I haven't read any of her files, just passed on recordings of little Virginia to Family Traits," he points out.

"But you haven't erased the files from your account either," she points out.

This is unreal! "So you already hate me?"

"But I didn't say that!" She shakes her head, like he's over-dramatising. "There are just a few things in this story that make me feel uneasy."

"Listen, young woman, had I played by the rules, you and I wouldn't be together now. Maybe it means nothing to you, but...."

"I didn't say that either."

Hiram's blood is heating up, "Had I played by the rules, I would never have found a way of liberating Philadelphia 6! The free world is full of labs where scientists play by the rules. Not *one* of them has been able to crack the P-21! If Virginia is set free tomorrow, it will be *precisely* because I break all the rules!"

"That might make you an air force colonel, but it's not going to work with me," she retorts, completely unaffected by his yelling. "If you ever want to be with me, you'll have to play by the rules!"

"All right!" he shouts, "Which rules?"

"Never lie to me. Never ask me to wait."

Hiram is taken by surprise. His anger drops flat. He's left thoughtful. "I can do with rules like this!"

Her face opens, "It's what my mother told Serah when he first asked her to be his girlfriend."

"Was it?" Affectionate smile. Then, "Wait a minute. But wait a minute, how can you know that?"

Mischievous smile, "I just know."

Outraged, Hiram points an accusing finger, "*You* have read *all* of your mother's files, haven't you?"

"And so what? It's all I've got of her."

Technically speaking, Virginia didn't break any rule. Nothing prevents her from reading Hiram's account, in which there happens to be the Panther's private files. But this doesn't take anything away from Hiram's outrage, "And what would you say if *I* had read all her files?"

"I'd say, who exactly are you running after, Mr Elmian – me, or the Panther?"

Like a punch in his solar plexus.

Shocked. Speechless. His lower jaw dropped open.

She changes tone, "Oh look, I'm sorry. Computer," she invokes, "erase the last 20 seconds from Hiram's memory!"

He looks at her, incredulous, like is this virtually happening?

She turns down the heat and starts again, "I'd say, Hiram, please! *Please* don't do things like this. Not to the people who love you. You're going to poison everything." A voice free from irritation, carrying the marvellous presence. Reaching into Hiram's heart.

Inhaling the White Eagle, deep, deep. "I hear you, Virginia."

She opens to him, like maybe he is not a dangerous maniac, after all.

When she opens, he finds her a different woman. Amazingly beautiful.

Something passes between them. From Virginia's presence to Hiram's Point-ness in Revelation Sky. Makes Hiram wonder how she would react if he were to take her hand now. But he doesn't.

Just a long silence.

Ring at the cabin door. "Hiram? It's Sally!"

In RR, he welcomes her, "Enter, noble knight!"

White Bear runs into the empty 3 by 3, rushes into his arms, "Hiram! Oh, Hiram!" Rendered strong by joy, she lifts him up and makes the two of them spin. "Hiram! What you did was fantastic!"

Clearly, it's meant as a brotherly hug. Still, it does something to Hiram to find himself in the arms of such a beautiful woman.

She lets his feet land on the ground but doesn't let go of him. Holding him tighter, "Hiram, that was the most extraordinary experience. I've never felt so high in my entire life."

She is still dancing on the beach, following the music of the statue-god.

"What am I going to do for you, now?" she says, blasting him with the Philadelphians' warmth.

"Stay a-live!" He takes her head in his hands, "Please, stay, a-live!"

She chuckles, "So you are starting to understand what it's like to be a pilot in the Philadelphian Air Force!"

"If that's what it is, I hate it. As soon as the war is finished, I'll resign!"

She laughs, lets go of him. "Hiram, I want you to be my guest at No Limits."

"But I can't. I haven't graduated..."

"Tss, tss..." she shakes her head. "Tonight I'm the queen. I said I want you in. No one can go against my will."

"But..."

"Resistance is futile! Don't you understand? I'm the queen! So you'll come and pick me up in cabin 10D1632 at 20:30."

"But..."

You left your keys at No Limits.

She gives him a long, noisy brotherly kiss on the cheek. Then, "See you at half past eight!" And she leaves.

Returning to channel 1, warmed up as under the midday Sun, "Oh, I love this place, you know."

Virginia echoes his joy with a smile, "Mothership 7?"

"No, the Philadelphias. I have their spirit under my skin! If I hadn't had such a bitch of a life, I'd say I was born to come here. I love these people. I'd give anything for them."

"Why a bitch of a life?"

"Read my personal files again, I'm sure you'll figure it out," he says, walking to the door.

"Are you going out?"

"I need to talk to someone," he says.

"Want to talk to me?"

He stops in the doorway. Usually, when he feels like this, he turns inside and calls,

Virginia, how I wish you were here!

Right now, it doesn't sound appropriate.

Turning back, looking at her. Lovingly. She is *so much* like her!

She softens her voice, "You're pissed off with me!"

He shakes his head slowly, "I can't. I love you too much. If I were to take you out of my life, there wouldn't be much left."

Still in her soft voice, "That's the side of the story that worries me a little."

"I understand," he says, like he really does. "Thank you. You have taught me a lot already."

"Are you already saying farewell?"

Sounds like her abandonment trauma is from another life.

"Look, I want to be honest," he says. "I don't know that I want to get attached to you. It's that... I'm not good at losing people. Gets me down. Badly."

She shrugs, "Am I not just a computer clone?"

"Doesn't work like that for me."

3.26 Tuesday 12:05 (ETA 63 hours)

A sudden hunger to know more about the descenders.

The Panther is too busy. Serah and Marek are flying round-the-clock missions in dangerous zones. Hiram tries to contact Patricia Elchevarra but she isn't in her office. So he leaves a message for her with a router to AR-redirect her answer to where he'll be going next, which he hasn't decided yet. He just walks randomly from RR corridor to RR lift and from RR lift to RR corridor, watching RR people, for no reason. It's called a stroll. Hiram had never done it before.

A useless exercise, in many ways. You walk through places with your mind elsewhere, you don't even remember how many security guards you passed or which weapons they were carrying. Yet precisely because your mind is elsewhere, you get a 4D kind of global vision that has meaning and speaks to your Point, like you see much more of the place and the people than if you were 3D-looking at them.

Hiram ends up in a weird place that looks very much like a large sandpit, but with RR sand instead. RR toddlers are playing with each other, their RR parents watching them from benches strewn around the playground's perimeter. Hiram sits on a bench, mindlessly watching a little boy bashing a little girl with a large RR plastic shovel. The little girl starts screaming like MS7 is being taken over by the Rex. Two parents rush to the scene of the crime, one coming from 3 hours, the other from 9 hours. A man and a woman. ETA 15 seconds... 10 seconds... 5 seconds... Contact! But they're not even fighting or arguing. Just cuddling their kids and laughing.

There's something beautiful about the way they laugh. Real joy.

Blessed is the land where men have heart!

"You look preoccupied, Lieutenant."

"Eh?" Turning to the right, Hiram sees a woman at the other end of his bench. She's perhaps twenty-five. Not that old for non-pilots, who often live beyond twenty-seven. She's got short red hair and she looks like she hasn't slept for two days.

"You look preoccupied," she smiles at him.

"Fair to say!" he nods, watching the man and the woman returning together to the bench at 3 hours, their kids at peace for the moment.

"Tell me," she says in an accomplice's voice, "is it war, or love?"

Makes him chuckle. "I guess war was pretty good to me today!" he turns towards her.

"I knew it was love," she nods. "What's her name?"

"#11,867,461. I mean, Virginia. It's... complicated stuff."

Screams, coming from 11 hours. Two squadrons of toddlers firing sand, targetting each other's eyes with remarkable precision.

" S'cuse me one moment!" the woman starts running for a joint rescue operation involving a dozen parents. Meanwhile, the other little boy has started bashing the little girl again, this time with two buckets, one in each hand.

Makes Hiram wonder how little children amuse themselves in the Fields of Peace. It can't possibly be the same.

When the woman comes back Hiram learns her name is Jahalna, her boyfriend is a tactical officer on board the Rishikesh and she hasn't slept for three days because their other son R!chard has German measles and the doctor said don't treat him, childhood diseases are good for the soul. She's never studied sciences but she's glad to learn Hiram's field of expertise is hypersynchronicity because she *really* believes in it, she uses the I Ching all the time. Despite her lack of background in mathematics she has no difficulty creating a space in which Hiram feels completely comfortable talking about his girlfriend problems. Strangely, she finds Virginia much more interesting than #11,867,461, even though she finds the latter's name original. But then of course Hiram had to leave a few details out.

"Hiram!" full-size P@ AR-appears to him, but invisible to Jahalna. "Still want to talk? I haven't had lunch. Want to go some place and eat?"

"I want to talk private matters. A restaurant wouldn't do," he says. Jahalna can see him and hear him talk. She can't hear P@.

"Come to my office, then. We'll eat with the rats! Come quick, I got some sensational news to tell you."

Hiram takes leave of Jahalna feeling very much better. He thanks her. She invites him to pop in and visit them in cabin 05G2023 any time.

As soon as Hiram arrives at the office, P@ makes him lie down in the gravito-field bed and takes a few readings with her scanners. Her normal way of greeting descender friends. Simultaneously, she invokes Multi-V. On channel 2, she VR-links to a big guy wearing a white cylindrical hat. He's standing in the middle of a busy kitchen, pots everywhere. It smells so much like food that Hiram immediately feels sick.

In RR, P@'s scanners pick it up. "Feeling nauseated?" she RR-asks.

"Nothing serious," he RR-tells her.

She decides on a quick but thorough examination before lunch. "Poke out your tongue!"

Meanwhile on channel 2, "Hello Alfredo! What's your special today?"

Hiram grins. Must do something to your life to be named after the fastest torpedo in the solar system.

"Dr P@!" The torpedo-man seems delighted to see her. "I got kronomolons, sauce napolitaine. Look!" he proudly exhibits a plate with coagulated whitish froth swimming in a blood-like thick red liquid with clots.

In RR, P@'s scanners pick up an aggravation of the nausea.

On channel 2, P@ is drooling, "Looks fantastic! I'll have a large portion. Hiram, what would you like?"

"A glass of water."

"Is that all?"

"A large one. But no ice."

On channel 6, P@ has created a delicious park with a 100-metre-high cascade and hundreds of multi-colour-feathered birds who sing all at the same time. She raises both hands and speaks to Hiram with great excitement, like the Great Dawn has been scheduled for tomorrow. But the birds are singing so

loud that Hiram can't hear a word. So P@ turns the bird-volume down and starts again, "That's it! The hundredth monkey. We're all so thrilled, you can't imagine!"

"What's that monkey?" Hiram asks.

"Mur&da Fox, a knight on Philadelphia 12. She's the girlfriend of a descender friend of mine. In the last 24 hours her DNA has opened spontaneously, without her going through the induction process. The first time ever."

"So she has become a descender herself?"

"Induced by the power of love. Makes me feel *so good* it happened like this!" P@ exclaims, slight flutter in her voice.

She's a warm, romantic little thing, despite her ridiculous ponytail.

On channel 2, she finalises the order, "1 large garlic bread, 1 flonion soup, 6 plankton-fish cocktails, 1 large kronomolon with parmesan gratin and spaghetti, hot lemonange pie (double) with super-choc ice cream and thick cream. And a large glass of water."

"Won't be 5 minutes, Dr P@!" the torpedo-man says.

With an appetite like that, no wonder he likes her.

Closing the VR link, she confides in Hiram, "You have no idea what the descent has done to my digestive system! As soon as I woke up from my first death, I said, 'Where is the menu?' And it hasn't stopped since."

On 6 she explains, "Mur&da is unconscious at the moment. She collapsed in the middle of a White Line drill. When they took her to hospital, they found all the standard signs of a descent phase 1."

"Which are?"

"Clinical death, but with cellular aberrations all over the place. And of course, DNA chaos."

"But that's... terrible!" Hiram can already see Virginia falling dead in his arms. "Is it really love that caused it?"

"I have absolutely no doubt it is! That and the 100th monkey effect, of course. For years, the Sons of Apollo have been warning us that past a certain number of descenders, other people's DNA would start opening spontaneously. Some kind of resonance, not unlike a critical mass effect. I find it a gift of heaven that the first person to descend without induction is Mur&da. You have no idea how much she and Gideon love each other."

"Commander Gideon of Philadelphia 12's Special Task Forces?"

"That's him. Four years ago, he and Mur&da both volunteered for the descent. They wanted to go through the journey together. But the Sons of Apollo rejected her, saying her time hadn't come yet. Sounded cruel at the time – trial of trust, trial of love. Now it makes beautiful sense. The gods know their business," she nods in appreciation.

Hiram can't avoid worrying at the idea the descent may be contagious, like some new fatal VD. "What's a descender supposed to do when the woman he loves collapses dead from descent?"

"Nothing!" P@ says, emphatic. "Precisely, nothing! Pray to the Mother of the Light and keep your hands off. Any attempt to revive a descender proves fatal. Descenders must be left alone for as long as they want to be dead."

With Bobby, Mat did it differently, letting his cat take an active role.

"But what if Mur&da never wakes up?"

"She'll have to reincarnate and start again. There's nothing we can do about it: about 20% of descenders never wake up from their first death."

"And after that?"

"They go through an average of twelve deaths in a three-year period. At the end of which one third of them are dead-dead, the other two thirds stabilise. With you, it went faster. Mat Donohoo monitored your descent superbly."

Virginia dying twelve times? Hell! The very thought triggers a fountain of compassion for Commander Gideon.

In the RR office, P@ has finished her examination. "Get off the table. You're fine," she says, closing off Multi-V.

"Thanks." Hiram gets up, bringing all of himself back to RR.

Activating a mindswitch, P@ lowers the gravito-field by two thirds and turns it into a gravito-table. She takes a white cloth from a cupboard and covers the table with it. She sits on the floor and pushes a few pieces of equipment away with her foot so Hiram can sit down too.

In a large cage on the shelves on the wall behind her, there's a small RR rat that's showing signs of agitation.

"This is Plato, my favourite descender rat!" she smiles affectionately. "When he sees me setting the table, he knows some food is about to be delivered. Sit down!" she invites Hiram.

Hiram sits down, realising in a flash that White and Black were descender cats. Directing his presence to White, lovingly,

I miss you, cat!

Tuning in, he finds Plato's Point remarkably fast-moving, like a high pitched voice bordering ultrasound. But nothing like Mat's cat's heavy Point-artillery.

"Is Plato still at the stage when he needs to be kept in a cage?" he asks.

"It's not a cage, it's his home. He can go in and out as he pleases. But he and I have a deal: when I see patients, he stays home. Most of the time. Plato!" she calls him. "Now you can come out."

Using a mindswitch, the rat opens a trap door. He bolts out of the cage, jumps his way down from shelf to shelf, surfs on top of the chaos which covers the floor, goes straight onto P@'s lap, where he lies on his back like an over-trusting cat.

"Hello, gorgeous!" she bends down, tickling his furry belly.

On the same shelf there are six other cages with a couple of rats in each of them. "Descenders too?" Hiram asks.

"On their way."

"But how can an animal be a descender?" Hiram questions. "I thought the DNA of descenders responded to their own will. How can that work with animals?"

"Usually, their descent is moulded on the archetype of their species. The species' Group Ego. Then of course, you can introduce variations. Strictly speaking, they're not descenders, even though the induction they go through is similar to that used on humans."

Naively, "Couldn't that be terribly dangerous, though? What if it went all wrong? Once I met a descender-cat with phenomenal maruding powers. Suppose you bred mice like this and they started reproducing all over the place."

"This was the topic of two of my PhDs," P@ announces with a candid smile.

Mathacker's grin, "I see the plot! Create little monsters that can fuck up computer networks like hell. Send a few couples to every space station of the Rex, and a colony to Hyper-Earth Link. Let nature do the rest! I bet your PhDs were classified."

"You bet they were. All three of them."

He puts his hand on her shoulder, "I like dangerous women."

Same candid smile, "There are a few of us in this department."

From that moment onwards they're friends.

Ring at the cabin door. Plato bolts under the table, hiding under the cloth. P@ goes to take reception of two heavy bags of food that smell, and covers the table with dishes.

Watching her eat is a disturbing experience, like some gruesome computer game. Hiram keeps his eyes fixed on his glass of water, trying to ignore the noises.

"I always get plankton-fish cocktail for Plato," she says, throwing a small chunk under the table, swallowing the 5.75 other pieces one after the other.

"How long since you descended, P@?"

"Nearly seven years. Same batch as Marek and Serah. But the descent had the opposite effect on them: they hardly eat anything, now."

"So you were only eleven when you descended?"

She bursts out laughing, generously spraying flonion soup on the napkin, "No, I was nearly sixteen! Do I look *that* young?"

"Must be the ponytail."

"What's wrong with my ponytail?" she asks, holding her garlic bread as a threat.

"Nothing, nothing! Anyway, see what I'm getting at? I want to know how it feels to be a descender. What it means. Where it's supposed to take me."

She spends a few seconds thinking and finishing the garlic bread. "No one has ever spoken to you, have they?"

"No one. I don't even know why it's called 'descent'!"

"The Panther would be a much better person to tell you these things."

"She's too busy, there's a battle on the boil. But precisely, I need to be ready for the battle. I can't wait, I need to know now!"

She dips her finger into the chocolate ice cream, licks it, "All right, I'm going to take care of you. Just give me a few hours so I can consult with relevant authorities. You're not drinking your water?"

"They forgot to bring a straw."

"Not a problem!" She gets up and grabs a thin sealed box from a cupboard, unseals it, revealing a surgical plastic catheter about the size of a straw. "Perfectly sterile!" she hands it to him.

"Thanks!" he dips it into his glass and drinks a sip.

She watches him. A click in her Point, "Hiram, how about I show you something amazing?"

"Please!"

She takes half a lemon from the bag that held her fish cocktail and squeezes it into his glass of water.

Makes the water look disgusting, like it's been polluted by organic matter.

"Drink!"

Past the initial disgust, the taste is incredible: violent, sharp, awakening. Hiram can immediately see how he could become addicted to this.

"I love it, P@!"

"It's called lemon water," she says, tears in her eyes. Holding his gaze, she invokes, "Computer, take a message to be routed through the blockade via the red-hot pipeline. Destination: Dr Mat Donohoo, TS5 on Titan.

Praise the Great Apollo, master Mat Donohoo!

Just a short note to tell you how immensely grateful we are to you for what you have done for Hiram.

Your servant in the light, Patricia Elchevarra, speaking for the Philadelphian descenders."

They stay silent for a while, then she finishes eating. Everything. Methodically, bag after bag.

Hiram spends the rest of the afternoon giving his friend P@ a hand. He doesn't want to know any details about her secret weapon-mice because he doesn't trust himself to keep secrets from the enemy. But P@'s virtual labs rely heavily on computer simulations of the Rex's hardware and its superastral models, which her little monsters have been bred to slow down, parasitise, distort, confuse, and viciously fuck up in all Point-imaginable manners. The problem is that a number of the simulations got it all wrong. They were written before the programming gurus of Philadelphia 12 received Hiram's A^&~ manual.

Hiram makes her day by giving her a copy of his private collection of state-of-the-art simulations, written in A^&~ – the real thing, the one used by Hyper-Earth Link's finest tactical experts, including the enemy himself. It sends P@ back to the drawing table. Her mice are getting headaches, they can't cope, the simulations have become too sexy for them. At 17:28, pacing to and fro in a huge lab with thousands of mice, P@ and Hiram have a momentous flash. They Point-catch an archetypal glimpse of a new rat with a nervous system entirely moulded on the hyperlogical structure of A^&~ – and therefore, necessarily, hypersynchronic abilities of unprecedented magnitude. At 17:29, P@ exclaims in a tone of absolute certitude, "This is the rat I have been waiting for all my life!" From there it all goes very fast. By 17:37, Hiram's team of virtual programmers have begun the transformation of P@'s rodent-mind software. At

18:20, another virtual team begins a re-working of Family Traits' Rats and Mice module. By 19:03, a new program is born, combining P@'s library of rat modules with Hiram's hottest goodies. And at 19:45, while P@ is taking reception of two large bags of sandwiches, Brünnhilde announces, "I haf your baby ratss, Herr Bobby!"

Watching the 1.90 metre tall blonde Teutonic beauty with ridiculously large breasts, long plaits and a Viking's helmet, P@ shakes her head, appalled, "Did you program this?"

"Of course! She's the woman of my dreams."

"And you think there's something wrong with my ponytail!" she sighs, opening the first bag of sandwiches.

By 19:51, the babies have already blown up 3 Aristotle-class carriers and a small station around Deimos. By 20:03, P@ is opening the second bag of sandwiches and a massive armament factory is blowing up on the outskirts of Tokyo. By 20:16, as they are strolling among piles of debris in what used to be an industrial complex in Mexico, Hiram says, "I gotta go, Sally P#cal has invited me to No Limits."

P@ interrupts her sandwich, "You got yourself a date with Sally?"

"No, not a date!"

"You bet it's a date! If she's invited you to No Limits..." There's an insistent glow in her eyes.

"You don't understand. We blew up some RR hardware together this morning. She and the Himalayans were on a bad line. I sort-of helped."

"But there's nothing wrong with a date! You don't have to justify yourself," mischievous smile.

"I really like you P@," he takes her in his arms and gives her a peck on the cheek, Eleonor's style, then turns and starts running. Coming out of the lab he invokes, "Computer, how do I get to cabin 10D1632 from here?"

3.27 Tuesday 20:30 (ETA 54.6 hours) No Limits, first visit

The cabin is a nice Trompe l'Oeil Reality, countryside landscape style with a small waterfall at the back. Sally is wearing an exotic costume made of long pieces of navy-blue silk with a golden edge, draped around her in a complicated way. A fractal touch makes the gold shine. Her hair is pulled tightly back from her face into a bun. There's a flat round red spot on her forehead, about the size of a 5.5 millimetre flat phaser gun.

Hiram finds her stunning. There is something unvirtual about the way her skin shines, something unlike any computer clone he's ever seen. It feels immensely precious. It leaves him pensive. And moved. Nostalgic, perhaps? There's definitely 'something' about beautiful RR women.

"Is this how the queen of No Limits is supposed to be dressed?" he asks, lightly touching the gun on her forehead.

"No. It's just how the Himalayans want to receive you tonight."

The red thing falls off her forehead. It wasn't a phaser weapon, just a dot.

"What's this for?" he asks while she picks up the dot from the floor and sticks it back onto her skin, between her eyebrows.

"It's called a tilak. A tradition of the country where I am taking you tonight."

"Was I supposed to come dressed in a particular way?" Hiram is already feeling embarrassed.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. No Limits will take care of you." She takes his arm, just like the Panther did when they went to La Coupole. And they set off to the magic place.

She's amazingly soft, like the Panther. It makes Hiram shiver. What if he became attracted to her too? RR, unlike the virtual world, can't be split into separate realities. Can you imagine the nightmare? Constantly torn apart.

Hiram shakes his head, pushing the thought away. "I need a crash-course in No Limits etiquette," he tells her, as they are walking through the busy corridors of MS7.

"There is no etiquette for you tonight. You're the special guest of the queen," she declares.

Sounds reassuring enough. Except of course if this special position makes him a focus of attention.

"You know, when I am surrounded by too many real people, I sometimes feel a little... uncomfortable," he prefers to be frank.

"I gathered that. I have arranged things accordingly," she gives him an accomplice's smile. "So just relax, and enjoy! You're in the hands of the queen, and on your way to the most sophisticated Virtual Reality ever invented."

"Oh, virtually?" He's suddenly enticed. "You know, the knights of TS5 regard No Limits as a bit of a legend."

"And rightly so!" Proud smile, "What do they say about it?"

"They say the HR gurus of Philadelphia 12 have put a hell of a lot of thinking into it. Neurocybernetics grand style – the best the Archive can offer."

"Absolutely true!"

As they are walking, Hiram notices interesting facial expressions on men when they look at Sally. She definitely does something to them too. Hiram finds it reassuring. He's not the only one. There's some profound chemistry going on here. He makes a mental note to discuss it with his mother.

"What type of VR do they use at No Limits?" Hiram is curious.

"All possible kinds of realities," Sally replies. "RR, VR, AR, VRR, HR, virtual emanations, past life flashes, time crossings, Archive visions of other worlds... you name it. And you move so smoothly from one reality to the other that you can't even tell the transitions. Even the most perceptive people get confused at times. Hiram, may I ask you something? What kind of diet do you have?"

Chasm of embarrassment. "Er... I hope you haven't prepared a dinner for me?"

"Stop worrying! It's No Limits. That means *no limits*, get it?" There is something disarmingly innocent in her smile, like they're on their way to the sandpit where all the knights are waiting for them with shovels and buckets and it's going to be *great* fun. "Now, what do you like to eat?"

"All right," he resigns himself to telling the truth. "My diet is supposed to be 95% proto-puree, 5% juices. But in the last few weeks I've been slack. More like 98% proto-puree, 2% juice. You know what it's like, when you're busy."

She doesn't get it. "What is proto-puree, exactly?"

"Er... you know, the brownish stuff. The medi-computer pumps it into your stomach when you're asleep or when you're purely virtual. It's very painless."

She remains serene, as in you-react-you-die. "So you've never eaten a proper meal, is that it?"

He shakes his head. Feeling like a miserable spastic in Loggia station.

"I'm sorry. If I had known, I would have arranged things very differently." She holds his hand so tightly that it really hurts him. But it feels special at the same time. With RR touch as with real life, there is not always a clear limit between hurt and feeling.

Now they're waiting for a lift, with thirty-one RR people around them. They don't speak. Sally keeps squeezing his hand, not realising she is hurting him. He loves the fire that's passing between them. But what is it that's so unvirtual about RR people? Why do they move you so deeply?

The lift has arrived. They walk into it. Hiram closes his eyes. With the inertial dampers, it's impossible to tell if the lift is going up or down. Sally is still holding his hand. She is incredibly giving, like Eleonor – but a real Eleonor. Must be amazing to have a real mother, if you think about it. So much warmth. So much love. The lift stops every few seconds. Hiram can hear people walking in and out. Virginia's presence is with him. Her presence is always particularly intense in lifts. Must be because the only thing you can do in a lift is wait.

Liquid starlight. Elixir of infinity.

So much warmth. So much love!

"Here we are!" Sally calls him back to the RR universe.

Hiram opens his eyes and, surprise, the lift is empty. The doors open. There's an empty corridor in front of them. At the end of it a large wall panel reads, "No Limits," with a subtitle, "Virtual Reality Nightclub." It's written in huge red old-fashioned holographic letters. There are no visible doors, only the wall panel.

"What's a Nightclub?" Hiram asks as they walk on the soft RR red carpet.

"It's what No Limits was called in the beginning, more than a hundred years ago," Sally tells him. "They've kept the name. A tradition."

"A hundred years ago, MS7 didn't exist," Hiram grins.

"No Limits' RR base isn't on MS7, it's on Philadelphia 12," she explains.

"So where are we going to now?" he asks. "Some kind of VRR-link to Philadelphia 12?"

Enigmatic smile. "See if you can tell for yourself what's real and what's virtual," she teases him. "Few people manage to make sense of No Limits during their first visit."

Stung with curiosity, Hiram puts his hands on the wall with the luminous letters. It's a solid RR wall. Hiram can't find the door.

"Follow the queen!" Sally smiles, letting go of his hand. And she walks through the wall.

Hiram bursts out laughing, "You got me already!" Now he's alone in the empty corridor. He probes the wall again, trying to poke his index finger through it. No luck. It *really* seems like a solid RR wall.

"Computer, run diagnostic on the molecular structure of this wall!"

The muffled voice, "The information you required is classified."

Laughing, "Fine! It's war. Access code #1253..."

"Aren't you coming?" Sally's head reappears through the wall. Only her head. Then she thrusts her hand into the corridor reality, grabs Hiram's hand and pulls him with her.

This time Hiram passes through the wall. On the other side he finds himself in a chilly reality. Fresh, invigorating air. It's a small room, with thick khaki cloth instead of walls and ceiling.

"This is not the cloakroom, it's the bodyroom," Sally announces.

The joke falls flat. Hiram has never heard of cloakrooms.

Pulling him by the hand, she takes him to an adjacent room. Not a room, a tent. Hardly larger than a regular cabin. The RR Himalayans are waiting for them, sitting cross-legged on an antique-looking purple rug. RR Edith and RR Gwen are wearing drapes like Sally's but of different colours. They too have a red tilak on their forehead. RR Zaban is wearing a long shirt and pants made of thin blue cloth. He still has the same black scarf tied as a band on his forehead. By his side, RR Mohan, dressed similarly but in white.

Magnificent man, this Mohan. Moved by Hiram's presence, he gets up and hugs him. "Just when I lose a brother, God sends me another one," he exclaims, his voice grave but warm.

Again, a feeling of belonging and completeness. Hiram is left speechless. Sally is still holding his left hand. These people seem to care for him as if they were his virtual family. And yet they are real people.

"Sit with us," Mohan ends the brotherly hug. They form a circle, sitting cross-legged around a RR low table (or so it seems).

No one speaks for a while. They just look at each other silently, as if nothing had more meaning than the fact of being together. Virginia's presence sits with them, totally comfortable with Mohan's luminous smile.

After a few minutes, Hiram notices he is no longer dressed in his knight's softmetal suit but in a long shirt and thin cloth pants, same dark navy-blue and gold as Sally's drapes. But it doesn't feel like AR Trompe l'Oeil. Puzzled, he passes his hand over his chest.

Under his fingers, the soft feeling of silk. Light and caressing.

If this wasn't No Limits, he would swear that he is really wearing RR silk clothes, not his softmetal suit. The gravito-field effect that accompanies the AR feels totally genuine.

And his boots have disappeared! He is now barefoot like the others, or so it seems.

Kuan Y!n walks into the tent, "Namaskar, brethren! Sorry I'm late."

She's wearing drapes too, but made of a fractal cloth that keeps changing like waves on the ocean.

"Wow, what a sari!" Gwen exclaims. "Where did you find it?"

"I made it myself," Kuan Y!n answers proudly, joining the circle. "So where's dinner? I'm starving!"

"The plan has changed, we're no longer having dinner," the queen announces. Then she reassures Kuan Y!n, "There's plenty of food in the other tents."

Other tents? Sounds interesting.

Burning with curiosity, Hiram asks, "How many tents are there in No Limits?"

"I have no idea," Sally answers. Then she invokes, "Grand Palam, how many tents tonight?"

An extraordinarily melodious low-pitched voice replies, "Presently, twenty-two. I may have to erect a few more as the night goes by."

"Thank you, Grand Palam."

Grand Palam's voice is unlike anything Hiram has ever heard – hyper-musical and *totally alive*. It causes a strange flutter to run through every cell of Hiram's highly disturbed nervous system. It turns his Point into a fountain of liquid gold, his heart into a flame reaching high in the heavens. But which reality are we in, exactly?

"Queen Sally," the voice resumes, "I have a message for you from the valiant knights of Science Station B14. They are running diagnostic tests on battle cruiser Agamemnon, and therefore will be late for dinner. They nevertheless implore their queen to wait for them, as they wish to congratulate her for the extraordinary feats of today."

"Send them my love," Sally answers.

"I will, Queen Sally. Any other wishes?"

"Yes Grand Palam. Ask Knight Varam to my tent."

"It will be done!"

EOC.

Hiram is out of breath, "What was *that*? Who is Grand Palam?"

"Grand Palam is a virtual emanation. He assists the queen or the king in the running of No Limits," Sally explains. "How do you like his Voice?"

"It's... it's... completely unvirtual!"

"Grand Palam!" the queen invokes, "Grant the power of Voice to Knight Hiram. Medium intensity."

"Yes, Queen!"

Sally smiles at Hiram, a playful shimmer in her eyes, "Come on, try it! No Limits!"

"Er..." Hiram begins. But what comes out of his mouth isn't some hesitant babble. It is a momentous wave of light. A staggeringly beautiful dark-blue flame with pink hues, more than a metre long. "Oh!" he exclaims, throwing another flame, twice as large.

There is a flabbergasted expression on Hiram's face. The Himalayans are laughing with joy. Even Zaban.

"Oh!" The outpouring of Voice continues. Sound beyond the imaginable. Sound with presence. Sound with Life. "But..." Now a white flame, mysterious, rich with a galaxy of million-year old secrets.

Hiram bursts into tears.

"Stop Grand Palam! Restore Hiram's voice!"

"Yes, Queen!"

The queen despairs, "Hiram, I'm sorry. I seem to be doing everything wrong tonight." She's still holding his hand.

Hiram is in shock. "Ha!" Half-convulsing, half-laughing, "Ha! Ha!" Then, "Ha! Ha! Ha-ha!" The convulsions are catching. The Himalayans all follow him. The tent turns into a madhouse. They're no longer sitting, they're rolling on the floor, laughing beyond the threshold of pain, holding their bellies, trying to stay in one piece.

Nothing abnormal. The power of the Voice is devastatingly cathartic.

Hiram's laughter is firing like a battery of phaser cannons, until he realises he's lost control of his sphincter. Trying to control himself, he checks his pants.

Thank God, they're not wet.

That makes him think he must not be in his RR body, despite appearances. His RR body must still be dressed in the knight's softmetal suit, which can dispose of urine and faeces through its own internal sewage system.

But then which body is he in? Whatever it is, it feels more real than RR.

He sits up to catch his breath and finds himself holding eye contact with Zaban, who has also regained verticality. The others are still lying on the rug. Gradually the tent becomes silent. Only a few long loud sighs expressing complete relief.

A supernatural feeling of peace dawns on them. Not just quietness. They are being held by an amazing presence. There is eternity wafting in the air. When you are infinite, nothing can touch you, ever. Safety through ubiquity. A flavour of World to Come. Immortality begins today. Everywhen.

But what reality is this?

Beyond endorphins!

Using his Point, Hiram probes the VR command system, trying to establish a protected communication channel to Sally. No Limits immediately responds to his intention, establishing the link for him.

"Our friends were expecting dinner, weren't they?" he asks the queen. No one else hears him.

"Who cares about food!" she answers through the protected VR channel.

"If you could get me some virtual food, then I could eat with them," he tells her. "I'd like that. Especially if I could be shielded against smells of RR food."

"That's easy!" the queen VR-answers. Then she sits up and, using her normal voice she invokes, "Grand Palam, time to serve dinner in this tent."

Grand Palam's voice extraordinaire, "Yes, Queen!"

"Dinner?" Kuan Y!n and Gwen reappear from under the table, true hope illuminating their faces.

"Yes, I've changed my mind," the queen says casually.

A line of waiters walk into the tent. They are carrying silver trays covered with food that doesn't smell.

"Are they virtual?" Hiram asks himself, observing them with intense curiosity. They are wearing white turbans and strange outfits made of white silk. Hiram touches the trousers of one of them as he comes to serve him. It does feel like cloth.

Yet they must be virtual, since Hiram isn't in his RR body.

"What's this costume called?" he asks the guy.

"Pyjamas, sir!" the waiter answers.

"And this is called a kurta," Sally points to Hiram's shirt.

The most logical explanation is that everything in this room is virtual. That would account for the fact that Hiram didn't wet his pants when he pissed himself.

But Sally is still holding his hand and, boy, does it feel real!

There's something else that doesn't make sense. The Himalayans are drooling at the dishes which the waiters are bringing to the table. Hungry RR people aren't usually attracted to virtual food. Many times, when Pen wanted to go to a RR restaurant, Hiram tried to take her into virtual food programs. It never worked, she couldn't be bothered eating. RR people like RR food. It's just the way they are.

Hiram observes his friends carefully. The way they are looking at the dishes leaves no possible doubt: they believe it's *real* food.

"Knight Varam!" Kuan Y!n exclaims.

"TOP, brethren!" A tall blond man has walked into the tent. He is wearing auburn pyjama trousers but no kurta. His broad torso is bare. A feline body with finely chiselled muscles. If this is a replica of his RR self, then he is an unusually handsome man.

"Varam!" Sally lets go of Hiram's hand, jumps to her feet and throws herself into the man's arms.

Varam closes his eyes for a short while, holding her against him. "Thank God you are alive!" he whispers, his voice choked with emotion.

"Alive and queen! Come, I want you to meet Hiram," Sally takes him to the table. "Hiram this is Varam, my cousin. He is part of choir Memphis of Philadelphia 12."

"Hiram!" Varam grabs Hiram's hand and squeezes it as if he was trying to break it.

"How do you do?" Hiram smiles politely and reclaims his hand, hiding it in a pocket of his kurta. Curious, "Are you on Philadelphia 12 at the moment?"

"Yes, I am. Hiram, thank you! Sally told me what happened this morning. I owe you, brother!" He is so moved he could cry. There is great dignity in his bearing.

Hiram tries to be conversational. "I also used to have a cousin I was very fond of."

"A knight?" Varam asks anxiously, as if a corpse was hanging in the air.

"Er... no. He died in a different way. It was long ago."

"Let's eat!" Sally keeps Hiram on her right and gets Varam to sit on her left. They all attack the food voraciously. The food on Hiram's silver tray looks just like the others': solid brownish chunks floating in thick fat reddish sauce, green puree covered in foam, whitish gel that looks uncannily like semen, and more. But it is purely virtual. It disappears as soon as he puts it into his mouth, triggering only vague sensory stimulations in his nervous system – he's mind-switched the virtual taste intensity to only 12%.

The others seem to take great pleasure in eating. While they are talking about their families, Hiram tries to make sense of this reality. What exactly are they eating at the moment? If it's real food, then they *must* be in their RR bodies. Then how come Hiram didn't wet his pants?

Through the protected channel, he VRs the queen, "Sally, I'm not getting it. Are you eating RR food at the moment?"

"Affirmative!" she replies. "Pretty good food actually."

"And are you putting this RR food into your RR mouth?" he asks.

"But of course!" she laughs, turns toward him and gives him a kiss on his cheekbone. Slightly wet. "Doesn't this feel like a real kiss?"

Transfixiating would be a more accurate word. Hiram's first RR kiss since he left Titan. He gulps, swallowing RR saliva.

Everyone notices there is something going on but no one makes any comment. Sally is the queen. The conversations keep running.

Using what feels very much like a RR spoon, Hiram keeps shovelling virtual chunks of food into his mouth. If the Himalayans are putting RR food into their RR mouths, then they *must* be in their RR bodies.

Is No Limits some kind of huge gravito-field in which they are all immersed? It would account for not wetting his pants. Gravito-fields include sewage processors. But what about Hiram's pyjamas and kurta, which materialised out of nowhere? Besides, Hiram notices something totally absurd – Varam pinches bits of food from Sally's tray and eats them, or so it seems.

Impossible!

How could Varam, who is on station Philadelphia 12, eat RR food from Sally's RR plate, knowing that Sally and her plate are on MS7?

That kills his virtual appetite. "I'm lost!" he says, using his normal voice and dropping his spoon. "I can't make sense of what's happening here."

"Come, let me show you around!" Sally gets up and takes him by the hand. She invokes, "Grand Palam, we need our shoes!"

"Yes, Queen!"

One of the waiters walks into the tent, carrying Sally's pink shoes and Hiram's black boots. Sally waits for Hiram to put his boots on and they walk out of the tent.

Outside, it's sunset on Mount Kailash. Breathtaking views of snowy mountain peaks stretching in all directions. It's an Archive prog – Virtual Reality with presence. It makes Hiram's spine shudder. Can't explain why, but isn't that what presence is all about?

Hiram counts twenty-three tents. Made of khaki cloth, like the one they just left.

"I have to go and greet those folks," Sally points to the largest of the tents, at least twenty times bigger than the Himalayans'. "Being the queen comes with a few obligations. Want to come with me?"

"I think I'll wait for you here, if it's all right."

"Sure! Don't hesitate to walk around!" She takes off.

Hiram is trying to figure out a strategy to make sense of No Limits. Option number one: brute force. Using CSS access codes, he could probably mathack into the system for a quick cannibalistic feast. But is this really the way an invited guest should behave? He hates to imagine what Eleonor would have to say about such tactics. So he resolves to play it on the well-behaved mode. "Let's try an experiment!" He plunges his hand into his trousers, his index finger just on the tip of his cock, and starts pissing again.

He can feel the flow against his finger but the urine doesn't go any further, it disappears.

So he *is* in a gravito-field with toilet unit!

Except of course if this is a VR designed to trick him into believing it is VRR. Leading to the difficult question, "Am I really feeling my RR body?"

"Hiram!" a voice hails from a distance.

Hiram quickly extracts his hand from his pants and turns around. It's Gideon, the man with the brightest eyes in the solar system. He is not wearing pants but drapes, kind-of like Sally's sari but more messy and bright orange colour. Thirty-five centimetres above his shining-bald head, there are twelve virtual silver stars distributed along an arched line.

"Commander Gideon! How *are* you today?"

Gideon thumps-thumps his way to him through the snow, "No Commanders at No Limits, Hiram! We're all knights here."

"Good to see you, Knight Gideon!"

"Good to see you, brother!" The general roundness of his body shape adds to the enthusiasm that passes through his voice. There is something existentially excessive about this man. He must be a disciple of Barkhan Seer. "The first time we've seen you at No Limits, isn't it?"

"Correct!"

"As one of the masters of the place, let me officially welcome you!" Gideon takes Hiram's two hands but squeezes them only moderately.

"What are the Masters of The Place?" Hiram is curious.

"The knights in charge of No Limits. They're the guys with the funny stars above their heads."

A perfect opportunity to learn more about The Place. "How often do knights come to No Limits?" Hiram asks, getting his hands back and protectively keeping them in his pockets.

"Once a day, or sometimes more. There is more to No Limits than is apparent to the eye."

"The knights come here to eat?"

"No Limits is like all great spiritual teachers, it acts as a mirror. If you come for food and company, it will give you food and company. If you come for more, then..." mysterious smile.

So No Limits isn't just a restaurant! Hiram is even more interested. "What else can you find at No Limits?"

Gideon smile's broadens, "Anything! There are simply *no limits*." There is something openly provocative in his tone of voice.

Hiram finds himself smiling with him. "You're tempting me!"

"Feel free to explore."

"But I'm only a guest here. I haven't graduated as a knight, you see."

Gideon puts his hand on Hiram's shoulder. "As one of the masters of No Limits, I officially grant you access. We are honoured to have you here, Hiram. You can come back any time."

Hiram is shaken by a wave of excitement. "Can I... *really* explore?"

Gideon answers with a mathacker's grin, "Try us."

Flash in Hiram's eyes. "I might."

"Ha! Ha!" Handclap. "Listen, changing topic, you and I need to have a good talk about God, UBQ, A^&~ and a few other things. How about tomorrow morning, 05:45?"

"It's cool with me. Where?" Hiram asks.

"But here, of course!" Gideon pulls his right earlobe.

"What about security issues?"

The mathacker's grin reappears on Gideon's round face, "No Limits has the most solid security system of the Philadelphias. Nothing compares with us on that level, not even High Command."

This place is becoming more interesting by the minute. "05:45, taken!"

"See you then, brother. For now you'll have to excuse me, I have obligations to fulfil."

As Gideon walks away Hiram asks for confirmation, "So you said I could *really* explore?"

Gideon bursts out laughing. Without turning back he mutters, just loud enough for Hiram to hear, "Arrogant neophyte!"

Hiram rubs his hands, thoroughly thrilled. He sits on the snow, watching the sky. It is night, the stars have come out. But the cold bites his bum. He jumps to his feet. Now his pants *are* wet. Who cares!

He invokes, "Computer, access code Virginia #11,867,461."

The usual muffled voice, "You must be joking!"

Hiram jumps up and down with excitement. He loves computers who can stand up for themselves. "Grand Palam!" he tries calling.

No response. Grand Palam answers only to the queen.

"Computer, how does one become a master of No Limits?"

Sound of steps in the snow. A woman is coming towards him. In the darkness of the night Hiram can't see her face, but above her head there are three little silver stars like Gideon's. "Are you calling, neophyte?"

"Kind of. Are you real?" Hiram asks her.

"Reality is such a relative concept!" Her voice flows like a river.

"Isn't it!" he sighs philosophically. "So where do I begin with this place?"

Now she is standing in front of him. "What is it that you need to learn the most in life?"

Thoughtful. "It's classified. I can't talk about it."

"Hiram!" Sally calls from a distance. She's just come out of a tent. "Are you okay?"

"Fine! Having a great time!"

"Want to come with me?" the queen invites him.

"No, thanks! I'll join you later." Hiram continues with the three-star woman. "If I could know for sure you're a clone, then I could talk to you about classified matters and erase your memory afterwards," he tells her.

"Hum..." composed voice, "where exactly are you from, Knight Hiram?"

"TS5. I grew up in Hyper-Earth Link."

"Oh, I see. Well, sorry to disappoint you, but I am not a virtual clone. My name is Benai."

Uhuh! Yet another real person. Suddenly cautious, Hiram conversationally drops, "So you're one of the masters of No Limits?"

"As shown by the stars."

He probes her Point. Tough, but she doesn't seem to be a descender. How would Eleonor engage in conversation with a RR person like her?

"Well, it's very nice of you to come to my help," he says, taking on a poor-little-me voice.

She doesn't buy into it. "Grand Palam told me you were trying to force your way through our security system."

"Oh... not really. No, just... exploring. I heard it's a remarkable security system. I have some professional interest in security systems. It's classified, actually. I can't talk about it."

Edith emerges from the Himalayans' tent-reality. "Hiram!" she shouts. "What are you doing?"

"Co-ming!" he shouts back. To the three-star RR woman, "Aren't you going to give me any info?"

"I have a message for you," she says. "A message from Grand Palam: 'Look for your friends!'"

Luminous flash in Hiram's Point. "Well, thanks Benai. Okay bye!" He leaves her behind and walks away from the tents. "Szar! Are you here?"

Math!lda VR appears in his reality. "Hiram! An emergency message!"

"What' ya doing here?" he asks the blonde clone.

"Red alert, Hiram! Your cabin is being maruded!"

"Is Grand Palam playing chess with me?"

"Negative Hiram! This is extremely serious. Repeat: security red alert. Your firewall has been infiltrated by an unknown maruding party of non-Philadelphian origin."

"What?" Mathacker's glow flaring in his eyes, like the 5th battle of Mercury is starting *right now*. "Who dares? What are they doing?" He starts running to the tents. Math!lda runs by his side.

What if it was the enemy?

"The first diagnostic tests of the MS7 anti-maruding squad show that the maruding party has already withdrawn," Math!lda reports.

By now, the enemy could have read all his files.

"But fuck! Fuck!" Hiram dashes through the Himalayans' tent, "Sorry I gotta go! I can't talk about it!" he just tells his friends who, believe it or not, are still busy putting RR chunks of food into their RR mouths. Racing to the body-room, where one of the servants hands him a softmetal suit, "Thanks for coming, sir!"

Hiram grabs the suit mechanically and runs through the door, Math!lda on his trail.

"Math!lda," mad race to the lift, "Give me a full link to my cabin, and tell the antimaruding squad to keep their asses off my firewall. If they touch anything they're going to cause a disaster."

Techno-dickheads can be dangerous. God knows!

Hiram takes control of the lift through his Point, maruding it into double speed and no stops until it reaches his cabin's level. AR Math!lda has established the link to his quarters. Hiram runs a first diagnostic test.

How bizarre!

The test indicates that no data was damaged. And it doesn't seem any data was copied either. Only a message was left.

It doesn't mean anything. The enemy is too clever.

"Math!lda, repeat instructions to MS7's AM squad: 'Stay, away!"

"Acknowledged!" Malth!lda gives a nod. Then, "All right, they won't intervene for the moment, on account of your CSS clearance."

"Good!" The doors open. Hiram rushes out of the lift.

This is when he realises that he is wearing blue RR pyjamas and a RR blue kurta. His boots are wet, as if he had been walking in the snow. His softmetal suit is in his hands.

What? But that is impossible!

Grand Palam 1. Hiram 0.

3.28 Tuesday 22:59 (ETA 52.1 hours) Apocalyptic sex

Hiram finds his cabin filled with the marvellous presence, Virginia waiting for him on channel 1. He throws his RR body into the gravito-field and, VR-dressed as a knight, joins Math!lda on channel 22

Math!lda confirms, "No data erased. No files have been read. The only thing the maruding party did was to leave a VR message. Would you like me to play the message?"

"No!" Hiram shouts. "Don't touch anything! Could be a booby-trap!" To himself, "Can't possibly be that someone fucked the Philadelphian network and made his way through my A^&~ firewall only to leave me a message!"

Hiram invokes his full mathacker's arsenal on channel 7. While he starts running his tests, Virginia turns up. "Am I intruding?"

"No, sit with me," he VR-manifests a chair for her by his side. "Whoever did this is a top-level mathacker. There is absolutely no way of knowing where the attack came from."

Hyper-Earth Link is definitely a possibility.

Hiram makes extra backups of his account on Philadelphia 12 and Philadelphia 18, then he sets up a virtual simulation where a virtual Hiram plays a copy of the message.

Lo! There's a Siamese cat running in the cabin.

"Yahoo!" Hiram jumps with joy, "So it was you!"

He terminates the simulation and lets the message run on channel 7. Mat's cat bolts from one side of the cabin to the other, passes through the wall, reappears on the other side.

Expectably, it's a smart message. The cat jumps onto Hiram, makes him fall onto his back, then jumps onto his chair, knocks it over, goes straight to Virginia's lap, jumps onto her shoulder, then behind her.

"Ah!" Virginia is screaming. "But what is that? It *is* an attack!"

"He's just playing!" Hiram says, getting up. "This afternoon I thought of him. With all my heart. He must have caught the wave."

The cat reappears through the door, runs to Hiram and climbs along his right leg as if it were a tree trunk, using his claws. Hiram catches him in his arms.

The cat snuggles against his chest, one paw on each shoulder, and purrs.

The incident is closed.

On 22, "Math!lda, tell the AM squad we no longer need them thank you very much. Was just a prank. A cat-friend of mind. Okay bye!" he switches her off. And he replays the message.

Meanwhile he watches the rest of his mail. There is a message from the Panther. "TOP Hiram, P@ told me you want to know more about the Descent process. Unfortunately, I really *can't* give you any time right now. Might have to wait till you come back from Philadelphia 6." A beautiful smile, then, "Fly well, eagle!" There is also a message from Serah, reporting that High Command's final decision about operation Reunion will be made in the coming 24 hours. Nothing surprising, since the enemy fleet will arrive in just over 48 hours from now. A team of tactical experts is working on a plan to evacuate the estimated 250,000 civilians who live on Philadelphia 6. A daunting task, considering they have all been turned into VR potatoes. And as soon as the rescue party comes out of the bubble of P-21s around Philadelphia 6, it will be engaged by a sea of Z-99s released from the infamous stocking.

Mat's cat still purring against his chest, Hiram calls high in Revelation Sky, "Inspire me!"

Closing 7 and returning to Virginia on channel 1, "Have you been waiting for me all this time? I thought you hated waiting."

"I had some company. I met Eleonor. We had a long chat."

Hiram swallows, justifiably worried at the prospect of collusion between the two women.

Virginia gives him a kind smile, "Eleonor is no longer not talking to you. If you want to see her, just call her. She'll come."

"Really? How did you manage that?"

She shrugs, "Maybe Eleonor thinks I'm a good influence on you."

Cautious, "Are you two planning to reform my character?"

"Look at you! You're on the defensive."

"I have to be cautious. One thing I learnt from our last meeting is that it's difficult to be spontaneous with someone you've lived with for years but who's never seen you. See, tonight the presence is the strongest I have ever felt it. So tangible, I feel I could touch her," he says, caressing the air with his hand. "I know this presence by heart, it's become part of my very fabric. And yet tomorrow I could be face to face with Virginia, and I'd be a complete stranger to her."

"No you wouldn't!" she says with vertical certitude. "If she is anything like me, you won't be a stranger to her."

Her words fall into him like pure mathematical nectar. He smiles, contemplating her green eyes, lightly touching the presence in the air with his caressing hand. "So what was I doing wrong with you this morning?"

"Nothing. I just... don't like the way you've been disloyal to Serah and the Panther. And... perhaps I don't like the idea you could end up in jail."

"Think I've been disloyal to you?"

"No. What you have done for me is..." she shakes her head, slowly, "...difficult to imagine."

Quite likely, if he tried to take her hand now she wouldn't recoil.

But he's learnt his lesson, so he doesn't. He activates a virtual console and sits behind it. "You know, there is no pressure. No strings attached. You're a free woman," he says, beginning some house cleaning on his account: deleting unneeded files, rearranging categories, etc.

She's well aware of the stratagem but still, she takes a chair and goes to sit by his side. "Will you tell me about the presence?"

"Don't think it would be wise," he says.

"Why?"

"It would freak you out," he says, eyes fixed on the console.

"One more sentence like this and I'll go!" she makes it clear.

"After spending eleven hours waiting for me? That would surprise me."

"All right!" she switches herself off. A clear-cut disappearance.

"No!" he bursts out laughing. "Please come back! I apologise."

She reappears in the chair, "All right this time, but if I were you I wouldn't try it again. So, the presence?"

He smiles, like her personality is not completely alien, after all.

Returning to his house cleaning, "The presence developed gradually. Two years ago, it was nothing more than a flavour of daydream. Something soft around me, when I thought of Virginia. Then it became clearer and clearer. And strong! Deep inside, I never doubted this presence. But it took a while before my mind started believing it was her. Can you feel presences?"

"No. I'm just a virtual clone, not a virtual emanation," she says.

Mathacker's impulse, deep in Hiram's belly: a wave of excitement at the idea of a big fight. "Do you think I could turn you into one?"

"I wish you could, but it's impossible. Only Archive people can spawn virtual emanations. Virginia is not one of them, yet."

"If you are just a virtual clone, how come I feel the presence so strongly when you are with me?" he questions.

"Teyani left some instructions about this in my program. She says my shape acts as an anchor. Because I am an accurate model of Virginia, a resonance takes place when you look at me. But it's your love for her that fuels the resonance."

"So Teyani thinks you are an accurate model!" Hiram forgets about the virtual console and turns to the woman by his side, rediscovering her.

Starting with the lips, because they're familiar – they're the Panther's. Bound to create a touch of confusion at times when kissing, but Hiram can cope with that. Beyond the lips, it's terra incognita. Hiram moves up to the green irises, tentatively. The almond-shaped eyes are a bit fierce, they have the clone's personality. Can't play up with her, she's a dangerous woman. Virginia's eyes probably won't be as bright, in the beginning. Following the curve of her highly carressable cheek, gliding down along her neck, landing on a shoulder of white flesh, mostly covered by her black dress.

I wish you could want my body. Desire me.

Realising in a flash that under the black dress, there is a feast waiting. Glorious breasts, a pair of hips just designed for his hands, two legs ready to open for him. She is not wearing shoes, her bare feet just by the side of his black boots.

Will you desire me?

"That was the presence, wasn't it?" she says.

"So you *can* feel her!"

"No I can't. But I can read in your eyes when she comes to you. Tell me, what is she doing at the moment?"

He shrugs off the question, "How could I know?"

"You *do* know! I'm sure."

You do know.

Startled by the two voices in unison, he closes his eyes.

"Don't think with your head. Just tell me what she is doing," she says.

"She isn't asleep. She's sitting by the lake. Kind of dreaming. I think she's in a sexual mood."

Dreaming of the man. The beautiful lover.

"She too can probably feel when you are sexual," she says.

Makes Hiram smile. He *knows* it is the truth. "She's lying down on the grass, watching the stars. She's alone."

"Can you make her feel like you are with her?" she says.

"Oh yes, I can."

With all my heart, with my mind...

"How does she perceive you?"

"A presence. But..." he chuckles, "I'm afraid she imagines me tall, broad-shouldered, handsome. With at least thirty-six perfectly white teeth when I smile..."

"Knowing myself, I don't think you should worry about this. Can you keep your eyes open? It makes it easier for me to follow," she reminds him.

Opening his eyes, he finds himself in front of this gorgeous woman watching for clues on his face. Trying hard.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Look, I don't like pretending," she tells him up front. "Whether I like it or not, the reality is, I do not exist; she does. So my only chance of having meaning is to be your thread to her. This way, at least you won't hate me when you find her and terminate me."

Touché!

He bites his lip. "You know, I think you are..."

"If you want to be with me, you play by the rules!" She points her index at him, "The rule is, I don't exist, only Virginia does. Understood?" While he nods, she goes on, "Now let's give her a present. We want to give her something beautiful. And lighten up, for God's sake! I don't think I'm going to live for very long, so at least give me some fun."

Feeling the presence. Hesitating as to where to take it from there.

"Describe to me, what is she doing now?" she asks.

"She's lying on the grass, her feet in the water. It's night in her reality."

She turns channel 1 into a dark landscape with a large lake surrounded by a pine forest. She's lying on the shore, her feet dipped in the water. Hiram is standing by her side. The stars are just a little brighter than normal stars so they can see each other's eyes.

It's not the right lake, and the log cabin is missing. Still, the resonance is startling. It makes the presence flare.

Mathacker's smile, "You're pushing it!"

"I'm not! What is she wearing?" she asks.

"I don't know. I like your black dress," he says.

Not a surprise to her. Having read his computer logbooks, she knows each time Penelope wanted to seduce him she came to him in a black dress a bit like the one she's wearing now, and it worked. But he doesn't need to know that.

"What would she want you to do now?" she asks.

"Look at her. Desire her."

Desire me madly. Want me more than anything.

"Do you?" she asks.

He kneels by her side, both hands on the wet grass. "I think she can feel I do."

Touch me!

She moves her feet in the water, creating droplet noises, "If she wanted you to touch her, where would your hand go first?"

He lightly places his hand on her, "Her shoulder."

Magic of the presence. A faraway explosion.

I love you, beautiful man.

She really does. So strong, it creates a pinch.

"I don't know that I can do this," he says, withdrawing.

She grabs his hand, puts it back on her, but lower down, on her chest. The strength with which she holds him against her takes him by surprise.

Touch me! I want to feel you.

"Tell me, I want to know, why have you never made love to any of your millions of Virginias?" she asks.

"Found them empty shells. They didn't turn me on."

"Do you find me an empty shell?"

Depths of heartness, "Oh, no!" There is not one woman in the world he wants more than her, all realities included.

Take me in your arms. Carry me to the log cabin, make love to me!

Too difficult. Too painful.

"What's difficult?" she asks.

"The lake. There's so much attached to it. It's like a sacred site. I could sit here and cry until the Great Dawn."

"My fault!" She erases the lake and the starry night, and restores the former setting. They are now sitting face to face. She is still wearing her black dress, and holding his hand against her chest. "Better?"

He nods, fascinated with her playfulness.

"Is she still excited?" she asks.

Burning with desire!

"Burning with desire!" he says.

"Good." Coming closer, looking him straight in the eyes, "Hiram, tell me something. Have you ever made love in 55 bombs at the same time?"

He bursts out laughing, "You're a devil!"

"No, 55!" Activating Multi-V to its full capacity, she creates 55 identical P-21s with a clone of herself in each of them, wearing 55 different dresses, not all of them black.

Slapping his thigh with his other hand, laughing his Point off, out of his mind. He clones himself, sitting in front of her in each of the 55 channels. The 55 Virginias are grave. The 55 Hirams can't stop laughing.

So good to feel your joy, beautiful man.

"Wait!" she tells him on channel 1. To engage his mathacker's instincts, she invokes, "Computer, how many people have been using Multi-V, so far?"

The muffled voice, "The present total is 146: 29 instances of Multi-V have been installed on MS7, 93 on Philadelphia 12, 15 on Philadelphia 8, 7 on Philadelphia 13, 2 on Science Station B14."

"We're doing well. Remarkably well," she tells Hiram. "Now, computer, do you have any way of telling me who used the most channels at once?"

"The record is held by Dr Zach Ferris of Science Station B14, who sustained 41 channels over a period of 7 minutes for an evaluation of 41 batches of Drosophilia Melanogaster."

Looking into Hiram's eyes, slowly moving his hand down onto her breast, "I think... we are about to make history, here."

She can read it in his eyes, the mathacker is responding. She's got him. "Can I ask a favour?"

"No limits!" he says. When people are in love, they say silly things like that.

"On channel 1, I want you in VRR."

"Done!" On channel 1, Hiram is now horizontal, wearing silk pyjamas and a kurta. On all other channels, he is dressed as a knight. She takes off his boots and lies down by his side.

Lying together in 55 nuclear reactors.

Make love to me! Make love to me!

"I want you to make love to the presence through me," she whispers into his ear. "Can you do that?"

His Point fixed on the presence, his hands move on her body, "Oh yes I can!"

Kiss me! Now!

From channel 1 to channel 55, he brings his lips onto hers. She responds with a kiss crescendo, hardly touching his lips on channel 1, applying a slight but growing pressure from channels 2 to 25, gradually opening her mouth to him from 25 to 40, enveloping him in her arms and pulling him against her from 40 to 55.

With all my heart, with all my mind...

From 55 to 1 he responds with a wave of kisses, from passionately wet to no more than an elusive touch.

I am with you, even when I am far away.

On 26 he whispers to her, "Do you realise how long I have waited for this moment?"

On 1 to 12, they gaze at each other, wonder in their eyes. Time is suspended. The creation has found its meaning. On 13, 16, 19, 22 and 29 she dims the light. They must guess each other. In channels 30 to 39 she creates complete darkness. From 40 to 55, the kiss intensifies.

I love you! I have always loved you.

On all even channels from 2 to 28 she takes off her dress in a quick hand gesture, offering her young goddess' body to his eyes. She has a birthmark on her right breast, another close to her navel. On all even channels from 14 to 38 he smiles, "You are *just* like I thought you were."

She knows he hates his body, so she chooses the safe darkness of channels 30 to 39 to undo his softmetal suit, erasing her dress at the same time. Skin against skin, bodies speak another language. As a result, from 40 to 55 the ongoing kiss heats up. He half-undresses her. Then on 53, 54 and 55 he rips her dress off and they roll in each other's arms, from one wall of the nuclear reactor to the other.

On 36 his caressing hand slowly moves down from her navel. She detonates the bomb as soon as he reaches her pubic hair, making him laugh on all channels except from 48 to 55, where they're too busy kissing to laugh. Throughout the spectrum it makes him more sexual. Hilarity engages his belly. To play on this she turns channels 9, 11 and 13, where she is still wearing her dress, into ridiculous realities with rainfalls of rose petals on a background of soft music, as in the most obnoxious VR soaps. And as soon as he lays hands on her she chirps ecstatically and detonates the bomb. He is now erect from 1 to 55. Rendered bold by laughter he penetrates her in the safe darkness of 30 to 39. She welcomes him with a blissful sigh from 1 to 55, except on 39 where she resists him, pushing him away, digging her nails into his skin. On Philadelphia 6, Virginia's legs are moving. Daydreaming by the lake, she shudders with pleasure.

Is colliding the galaxies' way of making love?

From 30 to 38 he moves inside her with infinite softness. In the embrace, yet another language. The gods wrote it in the early days of the Earth. On 39 they are fighting in the night. In tears, she screams, "Stop! Please don't do it like this!" But he won't let go of her. He's wild, as if hacking the network. From 48 to 52 the kisses have liquefied her. Entering her is like plunging into a warm sea. From 52 to 55 the kisses have become so indecent there is no need for penetration. On 9 and 11 rose petals are still falling from the clouds, but on 13 they are now lying on a beach. Who cares if VR soaps have overdone it? There *is* something about lying in wet sand, kissing while warm waves wash over your bodies.

At the cooler end of the channel range they're still gazing at each other. On 1 she wants him inside her. Cautiously – it's VRR! – she undoes the pyjamas and touches him. "I want you to tell me when she has an orgasm. What's happening for her, now?" she asks.

Closing his eyes, caressing her shins and moving up, "Feeling pleasure in her legs. Lots of pleasure." Resting his head on her belly, he projects his Point into her uterus. Laughing, "Now, she is on the edge."

"What are you doing to her?"

"I think... I'm maruding her vagina!"

"Yes!" shouting with ecstasy, "Marude me!"

Speaking from high, "I've always thought that hacking and fucking were derived from a common archetype."

"Come on," she takes on a temptress' voice, calling upon his mathacker's instinct, "Marude me!"

Easy. Mind-switching CSS access codes, he invades her program. Technically, it's not maruding, the Point isn't involved. Still, on all even channels she

screams with pleasure, orgasming to the high end of the Richter scale. Twenty-seven P-21s detonating in unison. Through some strange resonance, Philadelphia-6 Virginia is touched by the wave.

"She's really on the edge now, she could come any second!" Hiram reports. He is moved. It really does something to him to have twenty-seven Virginias coming in his arms. He can't see much, though, the P-21 flares are too bright. The aftermath of the explosions trigger a few seconds of quietness on most channels. Pure tenderness. Soul to soul. Infinity to infinity.

The nectar of the Forever Love legend.

Not on 39, though, where they are still fighting. "Don't you dare manipulate my program!" she screams. She punches him in the stomach and kicks his legs. He's closing in on her, she can't reach any vital parts, she can just lacerate his back with her nails. He forces himself inside her. "No!" she cries, "Why are you doing this?" Meanwhile she is about to come on 33, 37, 41, 47, 51 and 53. Hiram disconnects the detonation routine on all channels that aren't prime numbers. So when she starts orgasming on 33 she is taken by surprise. "No bomb?"

"I want to feel you! Come to me! I love you," the strength in his words triggers a chain of orgasms – channels 35, 37, 41, 43, 47, 51, 53 and 55. And on 32, 36, 42 and 48 she's already on the edge again. But she decides there isn't enough action on channels 2 to 29, so she tries a palette of fantasies. On channel 3 she triples herself – three mouths to kiss him, six hands to caress him. On channel 4 they're under water. Making love at the bottom of the ocean, in a garden of coral and seaweed. On 6 they're riding a horse. She's sitting naked on the pommel of the saddle, kissing him madly. On 9 she turns the rose petals into thick mud droppings. Soon they're wrestling in liquid dirt. On 11 she does the same, but with proto-puree instead of mud. On 13, the Sun is hot. The water ebbs and flows. On 15, 16 and 17 she inverts the sensory inputs: now she is in his body, and he in hers. She licks him on 15, fingers him on 16, and fucks him so hard on 17 that the P-21 explodes five seconds later – not a prime number for nothing. On 18 and 19 she keeps the same bodies but inverts the sexual organs. Now she has a penis, she is biting his right breast. On 20 she merges the two bodies into a bizarre hermaphroditic thing with two heads and four limbs, involved in internal coitus with itself. Hard to tell who's orgasming, but you can do it from morning to night, it never ends. And it's so deep that it causes a flutter in all channels. On 1 it makes her lose her head, "I love you! I love you as much as you love me! I'm co..."

The P-21's blast interrupts her. "Shit!" Hiram quickly mindswitches a new line in his prog:

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if {number==1} do not detonate.
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In the 20's range she experiments with zoological sensations. On 21 she's a Portuguese man of war – a jellyfish with long tentacles trailing behind her. She makes him a fisherman, throws him out of his boat into the water, envelops him in her trails and electrifies him. Portuguese men of war are jellyfishes with strange electrical properties. On 23 she is a huge black widow spider with ex-

aggeratedly hairy limbs, amorously and murderously moving towards her mate. On 27 they are two dragonflies flying tail to tail, copulating in the air. On 28 she makes herself an ovum, and she makes him a sperm. There are four hundred thousand other sperms. If he moves fast enough, he might reach her first. She's getting more and more ideas, they're soon going to run out of realities. Meanwhile on 39 he is still raping her. Defiled, desperate, she grabs a dagger and stabs herself. Furious, completely out of his mind, he keeps making love to her corpse.

Inspired by the action on channel 3, he takes over channel 5 and doubles himself. He sandwiches her, penetrating her front and back. But on channel 7 as soon as he doubles himself, so does she. There are now four of them making love in a huge four-poster bed. It's not enough. She wants more. She doubles herself. So does he. And again. Now it's an orgy, a mass of sixteen bodies intertwined and intersecting in all possible manners. On channel 8 he makes his penis extravagantly large. She hollows her body into a similarly extravagant vagina. He enters her, filling her entire body, even her head. She enlarges her breasts and pulls his face against her, smothering him. On channel 19 he turns her into a man. He sodomises him, but who is who? On 22 he shrinks his body to penis size and enters her headlong. Immersed inside her, he grabs her cervix with both hands and shakes it. On 24 he makes her a mermaid but then looks at her, not knowing what to do next. On 25, cannibalistic instincts take over. He makes himself a hairy beast and bites into her flesh, ripping her with his claws. On 26 she turns him into an android with a piston instead of a cock. Each time he moves inside her she hisses steam out of her mouth, her eyes illuminated by an electric flash. On 39 he has lit candles and resuscitated her. Now she is lying naked on a large stone altar, he is about to sacrifice her with the bloody dagger she's just used to commit suicide. For ten seconds she inverts the sensory input in all channels but number 1 – she is he, and he is she. Being her, he gets murdered on 39 and comes on 9, 12, 32, 38, 44 and 51. And then on 46, 47, 48 and 53. On 1 he shakes his head, wondering how much more of this he can take. Then from the Point, "She's on the edge! This time she's *virtually* on the edge." She pulls him against her with all her strength in all channels, and from 2 to 55 she mixes the signals so they are both lovers at the same time.

The gods have a thousand names for blue. Not one of them matches the blueness of the Flying Dragons.

"She's coming!" he screams, "It's huge!"

Space matrix access granted. Fly, Dragon!

She flashes ejaculatory HR signals from 1 to 55, making him come at the same time.

"Oh!" Coming is like dying in her arms. "I can see her!"

Faraway void. Aeons of strangeness. Glorious infinity and spaces packed with stars.

"I can see her." Channels 2 to 55 are extinguished. On 1 he is inside her, now completely still. Eyes clothed. Bathed in vastness. "It's immense," he whispers. "Spreading in space. Extending forever."

From beyond the Abyss of the Deep and the Fault of Eternity.

His face resting on her shoulder, "Blue! Blue! Incredibly blue!"

She holds him in her arms, "What kind of blue?"

Slowly, "Dark. Deep. Can't describe it. It's gigantic. And it's speaking to me. It's telling me something."

Her lips touching his ear, whispering softly, "Can you tell me what?"

Completely gone. Far, far away, "I have no idea. It's beyond words."

Forever love, White Eagle.

3.29 Wednesday 03:21 (ETA 47.7 hours) The next White Eagle

Waking up at 03:21 with a momentous flash of inspiration, and not thinking of the fact that the enemy will arrive in 47 hours and 45 minutes. On channel 1 VRR-Virginia is lying in his arms, fast asleep. While contemplating her, he activates Multi-V. On channel 2 he VR-dresses himself and calls, "Computer! Request high emergency communication with Colonel Serah!"

Serah instantly appears. He is on the flight deck of his Scalene 333. "TOP, Hiram!"

Hiram greets him, "To the Point, brother knight! Still flying?"

"On our way back from escorting 16 carriers to the blockade. What can I do for you, brother?"

"I've had an idea! A new plan. Our problem is that during the evacuation of Philadelphia 6 civilians, our carriers will find themselves under fire from the fighters and missiles that will come out of the stocking, right?"

"It's certainly one of our problems," Serah nods.

Clearly, Serah has other problems too.

"I cannot possibly seal off the stocking and confine the enemy fleet inside it," Hiram goes on. "However, I found a way to seal off Philadelphia 6 for as long as 11 hours. So it's like this: we create a hole in the wall, let our carriers move inside, then seal the hole. Enclose Philadelphia 6 in a bubble of P-21s. Then all we have to do is to clean up the Z-99s inside the bubble. After this for 11 hours, not one enemy fighter will be able to come in. I can make the bubble drift away from the stocking," he says, transmitting a holographic diagram.

Virginia saved by the P-21s – now *that's* art!

Serah closes his eyes, takes his head in his hands and thinks.

He is very tired. Hasn't slept for more than two days.

"Lavash's experts have proposed something like this. But they couldn't make it work," he answers.

Mathematical certitude, "I can! It requires serious modifications in the software upgrade. Not simple, but definitely possible. A^&~ is amazing, you know!"

Amused, Serah reopens his eyes, "Already written?'

"No, but you'll have it before the end of the morning. With all relevant simulation models. Will you speak to High Command?"

Straight, stiff, formal voice, "Right away, Lieutenant!" Serah says, as if he had been given an order.

Hiram in damage control mode, "Sorry, Colonel, I didn't mean to..."

"Hiram..." Serah gives his special half-grin, then becomes grave, shining with the gold of the Brown Robe, "...thank you!"

Said from far, far away.

Thank you for what you are doing for Virginia.

What? But that's Virginia's flow of presence! Did *he* say that? And if yes, how much does he know about what Virginia and Hiram have been up to lately?

High anxiety flutter.

Forever love, White Eagle!

Now, that's the end! But who is who, here?

Serah pushes his lips forwards and nods, watching Hiram's face with interest. Then, "Hiram, do you know there is only one White Eagle in the Philadelphian Air Force? The alias is handed down as a title, from knight to knight. The tradition started 112 years ago with captain Lea Loyd. An extraordinary woman, said to be the reincarnation of Alcibyadi of the White Eagle. Did Szar ever tell you about her?"

"The Atlantean Alcibyadi? Of course."

Nothing short of a legend! One of the masters who held the temple of Eisraim together while Atlantis was falling apart and the Archive launch was being engineered.

"See, Hiram... I don't intend to die immediately. Still, it's my traditional duty to appoint my successor. Now, hold on to your inertial dampers – next time I make it to No Limits, I intend to announce that *you* will be the next White Eagle."

Hiram is speechless.

But why does this man love him so much?

Looking into Serah's eyes is like seeing Semper. And Szar, and Barkhan Seer.

"I'll see you in the Golden Sun, brother!" Serah EOCs.

3.30 Wednesday 05:42 (ETA 45.4 hours)

Today, No Limits' door isn't a wall. And there is no sign saying, "Virtual Reality Nightclub." Instead, an arched colonnade and a curtain.

Hiram pulls the curtain and walks into a small room. The floor is made of black and white square tiles. There is a high vaulted ceiling. A knight in his late fifties TOPs him. Thirty centimetres above his head, there are eight silvery stars.

Another master of No Limits.

"Master Gideon is waiting for you," he tells him, pointing to the right. Considering 7 out of 10 knights die before age 27, this man is either a virtual clone or fucking lucky.

At the end of a short corridor Hiram finds Master Gideon sitting behind a round table, eating food. It's a small, empty room. Same tessellated floor. Gideon still has twelve silver stars floating above his scalp.

"Knight Hiram! Want to join me for breakfast?"

"No thanks," Hiram sits in front of him. Strangely, Gideon's RR breakfast doesn't smell. Grand Palam must be taking care of this.

"Gideon, we have a problem," Hiram announces. "It's quite possible my brain is being tapped by the enemy. That's why I didn't open your UBQ manual. Colonel Serah's orders are: ask me any question you want, but don't mention any sensitive intel about your work."

No reaction. The round-faced man keeps eating, scanning Hiram's Point. He has thick red lips. When he bends his head forwards to drink the brown liquid from his cup, the silver stars don't move.

Boy, does he have shining eyes!

Gideon gives a nod, "Acknowledged. Shame, though. UBQ is a hypersynchronic feast. It's the computer language that makes life worth living."

So the Rex already knows about UBQ.

Gideon has prepared a list of questions about A^&~. He speaks fast. Hiram answers, point by point. Gideon doesn't like what he hears. After twenty minutes of packed exchange he pauses. Pulling a face, "So the Rex's scientists *are* far more advanced than we thought."

"Way ahead of us. You have no idea how good these GM bastards are." Hiram confides, "The enemy's mind is awesome. Talk about software that makes life worth living! The P-21 isn't a mine, it's a mathematical revelation."

Worried, "But then... what else is the P-21 going to reveal when we try to marude it? For real." Gideon clicks his fingers, making the food disappear. It doesn't make sense. RR plates can't dematerialise like this.

Hiram shrugs, "We'll know soon. Listen, I know that despite all appearances No Limits is *not* a restaurant but... what else is it, exactly?"

Amused, Gideon grins, "A temple. No Limits is a neurocybernetic temple. When you graduate from the academy you are not yet a knight, you are just a pilot. No Limits is where pilots receive their initiation into knighthood."

"What's that? Can you talk about it?"

"But what did they teach you at TS5!"

"Sorry! At TS5 I was too busy in my bomb. I mean, with my bomb. I rarely came out of it. There are a few things I missed."

"A mathematical ascetic! I like that," Gideon sighs. It strikes a chord that resonates with his formidable Point. He then goes on explaining, "No Limits is about fathoming the nature of reality. And Archive secrets: visions of the past and of the future, non-physical beings and worlds. As soon as the battle is finished, I'll initiate you into your first degree."

"Is that going to give me a star above the head?" Hiram asks.

"Tss..." shaking his head. "You need to complete three times twelve degrees before you even become eligible for one-star mastership."

Sounds like the nature of reality is complex. "I gotta go. A few equations to polish." Hiram asks the twelve-star master, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Definitely!"

"I too am passionately in love with a non-descender. Can you tell me how Mur&da is doing?"

Gideon shakes his head slowly. "Not too good, brother. It's been more than three days, now. There is no sign she's coming back."

The fact is, 20% of descenders never wake up from their first death.

Hiram calls on the Eagle' softness. In his Point he recalls Virginia's love.

The blueness from beyond the Fault of Eternity.

Gideon is amazingly responsive. He seems to be receiving every speck of Eagle's light. The room fades. Now they are immersed in a gigantic expanse. The same blueness. Their reality flooded with Virginia's presence.

It's as if she was sitting with them. No Limits seems to be acting as a relay for her presence.

Through Archive Hall Seventeen.

Now she is the one who pours the Eagle's light into Gideon.

With all her mind, and with all her heart.

Eternity begins today.

From the Eagle, an absolute certitude:

Mur&da will not come back.

Her soul is already drifting, far away.

The Master of No Limits whispers, "That which is will always be."

He takes Hiram's hand, and infinity is his witness. He ends the meeting, "Brotherhood is friendship with will."

3.31 Wednesday 14:30 (ETA 36.6 hours) Bad feelings

Hiram is flying a RR Scalene 333 in the outskirts of the safe training zone. On channel 5, 51 and 53, linked to (fully authorised) brutal force from all over the Philadelphias, he is monitoring extra testing for his new plan. On channel 6, he and Virginia are slouching in a sofa, looking into each other's eyes, not really going anywhere but, boy, it is *so* good! In RR, he is sitting in the pilot's chair, AR Szar on his right, AR Varga on his left. Inspecting an AR holographic representation of the latest movements of the Philadelphian fleet.

Good news: MS7 has started moving in the direction of Philadelphia 6. Now a Scalene 296 can fly from MS7 to Philadelphia 6 in 3 hours, a 333 in 2 hours. A massive amount of fire power is being concentrated in the vicinity of the stocking: already a fifth of the Philadelphian fleet, with another fifth on its way. Get ready for the carnage when all the Rex's hardware comes out of the stocking! Never before in the history of human warfare has so much fire power been concentrated in such a small space.

"Black Panther to Hiram, protected channel: How is our plan going?"

"Hiram to Panther: Finalised. I transmitted the last details to High Command two hours ago. I'm just running a few additional tests."

"Working?"

Hiram nods, "Looking good for Philadelphia 6!"

"Reunion! I *love* this codename!" the Panther makes his day with one of her smiles. "You'll hear from Admiral Lavash some time before 24:00. You know, his wife is on Philadelphia 6."

There is hope in her eyes.

Inspired, Hiram raises his right fist, "Teyani is with us!"

She looks at him, amused and mysterious. Then, "Fly well, Hiram!" EOC.

On channel 1, Hiram lets out a long sigh charged with unqualified nostalgia. To Szar, "The Panther is the Panther isn't she?"

"Listen, may I speak to you privately for a minute?" Szar asks.

"Sure!" Szar turns to Varga, his navigator, "Excuse us, Colonel."

Hiram and Szar take off to channel 39.

"Hiram, I have a favour to ask." The Master of Thunder is grave.

Hiram is in a perky mood, like he can be anything, do anything. Each time he flies a 333 in RR space he feels like this. "Ask, man of the Law!"

"Hiram, Serah isn't well at the moment. Some serious karma attached to Philadelphia 6. It started more than 13,000 years ago, you know."

"What's karma, exactly?"

"In this context: heavy shit," Szar is looking down to his left fist.

"Is there something we can do for him?"

"Precisely, there is." Closing his hand, keeping his fist clenched. Then opening it and looking straight into Hiram's eyes, "Show him your model of Virginia!"

"Oh no! Not that! You can't possibly ask me that!" Hiram laughs in terror.

"I am asking you. As my friend, and as my brother."

The first time Szar has called Hiram his brother. And the first time he has asked something of Hiram so emphatically.

"Oh my God! Mathematical sky, help!" Hiram covers his eyes with his palms and hides. "But I can't. I couldn't! Never. It's impossible. And what if Serah asks me how I got the data to calculate my beloved? What do I tell him? That I hacked his cabin, hacked his wife's private account, deceived him into giving me his chromosome readings... I have betrayed them."

"Yep. You've also done more for them than anyone else in this life."

"Have I?" Hiram tentatively uncovers his eyes. Exposed to Szar's thunderous gaze, he promptly hides behind his palms again. "No! Please! Ask me anything you want but not that!"

"Black Panther to Hiram, protected channel: what are you up to?"

Saved by the Panther. Again! Hiram promptly VRs himself back to channel 1. Szar follows him.

"Hiram to Black Panther, protected: not much. Running my tests, completing my 20 hours of RR flight training."

She doesn't say anything. She just stays on line. It's not like her.

Hiram tries to be conversational, "Would you like me to shoot a few more beacons, perhaps?"

"Negative. Listen, Hiram... I have a bad feeling."

Can't be about the Himalayans. They've just returned home.

"Who?" Hiram asks.

"Serah."

Ouch!

Varga immediately locates the White Eagle. "Zone 20E. Three sectors away from Philadelphia 6. Damn far away from the rest of the fleet!"

Two dots in the middle of nowhere.

"Enlarge!" Varga orders, showing a battle cruiser and a Scalene 333.

"Hiram to Black Panther: what the hell is he doing there alone?"

"Unfortunate coincidences. Two accompanying frigates had a computer malfunction, they had to return to Science Station B10 for repairs. Then the Pelicans choir had to be diverted to carrier Jefferson, which was being approached by a squadron of Z-99s."

Varga highlights the Jefferson, "Zone 18D. Two sectors away." He enlarges the view, showing a carrier surrounded by a squadron of 8 Scalene 296s.

"Damage report," Hiram requests.

"Carrier Jefferson has been hit by four Beth missiles. Minor structural damage, no casualties. The attacking party of Z-99s have withdrawn."

The Z-99s were sent out to test the weapons – and the nerves – of the Philadelphian fleet. There has been quite a lot of that in the last 48 hours.

Hiram turns his gaze back to zone 20E. Completely empty, apart from Serah's 333 and battle cruiser Hallelujah. There are six battle cruisers on their way to zone 20E, but their ETA is 3 hours.

Tuning in. Is Serah in danger? Irrelevant question. The Panther is calling for help. How could Hiram possibly refuse?

Quick mental calculation. Presently, Hiram is at the far end of the safe zone. From where he is, he could reach Serah in just 32 minutes.

He inverts his direction. Now his fighter is heading towards zone 20E. Full speed.

"Hiram to Black Panther: my new tactical hypotheses require testing the resulting superastral model of the spherical part of the P-21 minefield, as in zones 20F and 20G. Request permission to leave the training zone."

Silence. From the Point, Hiram knows – the Panther is using her sight.

He insists, "A perfectly safe mission, Commander. There's nothing faster than a 333. I'm not escorting any ship. If anyone comes after me, I just buzz off."

"If I let you go, do I have your word that *whatever happens*, you will stay out of firing range of *all* enemy ships?" she asks.

"Of course! I mean... no."

Blasting power in her voice, "Hiram, *you must, stay, alive*! If you do not give me your word you'll stay out of firing range, I simply cannot let you go."

She's in her fierce panther character. Arguing with her? Don't even thoughtform it.

Hiram tunes into Master Barkhan Seer. From Archive Hall Five, he gets the absolute certitude he *must* go.

Varga warns, "We're reaching the limit of the training zone."

"Hiram to Black Panther. All right, I'll stay out of trouble."

"Permission to leave the training zone granted! I'm also sending Commander Gideon's Holy Blue Flame choir: seven Scalene 333s. They'll be reaching zone 20E in 39 minutes. And the Pelicans are about to fly back to 20E. Approx. ETA 50 minutes."

"Acknowledged!" EOC.

Left alone, Hiram screams, "What the fuck do you want me to do if I have to stay out of firing range? Shoot Z-99s from a distance with Sting missiles, perhaps?"

AR Virginia turns up from channel 6. "Hi! Mind if I sit with you?"

"Please!" the three men answer in one voice.

She takes position in the second copilot's chair, on Szar's right.

Szar glances at his pilot, amused. In one smile, Virginia has softened his anger.

"All right, let's practice shooting Z-99s with Sting missiles, then!" Hiram calls on Varga, "Send me a Z-99, Colonel!"

A flashing black dot appears on the navigational holograph.

Varga announces, "Z-99 fighter within short-scanner range in 30 seconds. In firing range in 3.5 minutes."

In 30 seconds Hiram can start maruding the Z fighter. In 210 seconds, Hiram will be in the Z's firing range. That leaves him 180 seconds to annihilate the Z's superastral model and make the craft vulnerable to a missile attack.

Master Barkhan Seer, help!

The net which Master Barkhan Seer has been generating in the last days is now finalised. A magnificent Point-construction woven from Thunder threads, super-charged with angelic forces and the clarity of Revelation Sky. As soon as Hiram calls for help, he finds himself hooked into it. Makes him feel vast, part of a greater whole. One with the entire Brotherhood of the Knights. One with the Archive people and the Masters of Thunder, who are all preparing for the battle. One with the great angels of the Golden Sun.

Semper is on his way to the Philadelphias. In the fleet from the Outer Planets. In the same carrier as Colonel Perry.

Hiram raises his right fist, "Hey, Semper!"

Hey, Hiram! In the Golden Sun, you and I, forever one.

"Scanner locked on the Z-99!"

Action! From his Point, Hiram follows the simulated short-range scanner signal, reaches the simulated Z-99 superastral model. Kind of pale, doesn't ring completely true. Point-stepping one level higher up, he meets the simulation unit. A puny 3D eyeboard-looking model. No match for Hiram's Point-fire.

"Boom!" he says, evaporating the model.

The Z-99 disappears from the holograph and a muffled voice warns. "Simulation unit off line. Repair should be completed in 13.2 minutes."

"Destroying our own computer isn't going to help," Varga says in a stern voice.

Hiram's cynical voice, "These simulations units are toys! Let me tell you, the ones which the enemy uses are of a different calibre."

No, beautiful lover! Don't think of him when you are in space.

Varga signals, "We'll be reaching zone 20E in 20 minutes. So far, so good – all clear."

"Computer!" Hiram invokes. "I want the statistics of the last 10 years: how many Z fighters have been shot down by Sting missiles and Sting missiles only? Give details of tactical circumstances."

Muffled voice, "119 Z-99 and 47 Z-101 fighters were destroyed by Sting missiles in the last 10 years, but zero in the last 2 years."

Meaning the enemy cleaned up the bug 2 years ago.

Mathacker's grin, "So it's impossible?"

The computer answers, "During the 4th battle of Mercury, 46 Z-99 and 31 Z-101 fighters were destroyed by Sting missiles. But all of them had first been damaged by other weapons."

So it *is* impossible. Trust the enemy.

The only way a Scalene can destroy a Z fighter is by firing phasers at it. Which implies being in firing range. Which Hiram isn't allowed to be. So...

Virginia, inspire me!

"Computer, load my simulation program of an A^&~-driven Z-99."

"I don't need to remind you that Z-99 fighters are not part of the hardware normally driven by A^&~ software, do I?" Varga says.

"I know, I know... except for the one we met on Tuesday."

"A rare exception," Varga stresses.

Thoughtful Hiram, "I wonder why. If *I* were the enemy, I'd equip *all* my Z fighters with A^&~ software. Much tougher superastral models."

"Engage simulation!" Szar orders.

Hiram Point-gears into the model and scans it. The model's heart is four-dimensional, but remarkably simple: 32 spinning spheres, one on each of the corners of a tesseract. Thousands of other shapes, mainly 4D, are orbiting around the heart.

Holding the model from the Point, Hiram flattens all the spheres at once. Another heart appears: 32 spheres delineating a tesseract that becomes the model's new centre of gravity. And so on. Each time Hiram smashes a heart, another one is recreated. The only chance of destroying the Z-99 with a Sting would be for the missile to hit during the split second between the flattening of a heart and the reappearance of a new one.

More power!

Stepping on the Point-net, Hiram calls on Barkhan Seer's superastral fire and pours it onto the model. Not unlike pouring sulfuric acid into a fruit basket. The model is thrown into total chaos but a new heart is already appearing. And another. And another... Hiram calls on more power, more venom-fire, but a warning impulse comes to his Point,

Stop! Right now!

Hiram immediately Point-lets go of the model.

A loud low-pitch buzz shakes the flight deck, and that stupid muffled voice comes in, "Maruding alarm! The computer's central unit is under attack. No damage yet but signs of stress in four..."

Hiram switches off the alarm, shuts the voice up.

"Computer, discontinue all simulations," Szar orders.

Hiram sighs, "I regret to tell you this, but..."

"...the Rex's computers are so much more resistant than ours," Virginia finishes the sentence. "We know, we know..."

Varga grins. Szar pushes his lips forwards and twinges his beard, quite satisfied with the personality he picked for Virginia.

For a few seconds, it's the infinitely peaceful silence of space. Contemplating the constellation of Scorpio, towards which the 333 is headed.

In front of Sagittarius, there's a tiny dot lit by the Sun. Philadelphia 6.

The rendezvous.

"Black Panther to Hiram: That's it. Our long-range scanners are picking up a party of 11 Z-101 fighters headed to 20E, ARCTYC."

The 101 is the latest model of the Z range. Much tougher than the Z-99.

She reminds him, "Hiram I have your word, you stay out of firing range!"

Silence.

From the Point, she can feel – he is thinking fast. "Hiram?"

Reluctantly, "Hiram to Black Panther. My word."

EOC.

"Here they are!" Varga points to 11 flashing black dots: Z-101s. "Their ETA in zone 20E is 14.5 minutes. We'll arrive in 12.5 minutes."

The Panther was warned by the Sons of Apollo. They want you there. They are waiting for you.

A DAU panel appears. Tapping from the central computer, Varga lists the forces on their way to Serah, "The Holy Blue Flames will arrive in 20.5 minutes, that is, 8 minutes after us. From the closest available carrier, the McIntosh, 24 Scalene 296s have just taken off, ETA 19 minutes after us. And the Pelicans are coming from the west, ETA 17 minutes after us. If Serah can hold it until the Blue Flames arrive, his chances are excellent."

With eleven Z-101s shooting at your ass, 8 minutes is a damn long time.

Semper's words running in Hiram's mind. *If you can overcome the black smoke, then you can do anything. Anything!*

"I *have* overcome the black smoke!"

There *must* be a way of holding the Z-101s back for 8 minutes.

Incoming message, "White Eagle to Hiram: What are you doing here?"

Massive influx in Hiram's Point. A breath from high in Revelation Sky,

Serah, for 13,000 years you have known I was coming. Here I am.

I have travelled all the way down into the abyss and back up into the light. Now, I am unstoppable.

"Black Panther to the Molten Stars. Our long-range scanners are picking up 2 Big Alfredo torpedoes headed to 20E. ETA 9.5 minutes."

As if 11 Z-101s weren't enough.

On the holograph, 2 red dots darting through the wall of P-21s, dead fast. If they reach the Hallelujah, it's going to be ugly like a plate of kronomolons.

"Hiram to White Eagle. Any restriction on maruding Big Alfredos?"

"White Eagle to Hiram. All maruding restrictions have been lifted. As of this morning."

So no more intel games. Action.

At last.

Varga, "The Big Alfredos will be within range of Serah's scanners in 3 minutes."

Point-pair with me, man of the Law!

Hiram gives a handclap, "Taken!"

Pairing with Serah, Hiram's Point is lifted up by a sudden, massive, irresistible pull. Rocketing as in a White Line drill.

The power of Thunder. Gervin behind Serah. Orest behind Gervin. Barkhan Seer behind Orest. The entire lineage behind Barkhan Seer.

Awesome.

High in Revelation Sky, Hiram recognises the being of light he met when Point-rescuing the Himalayans. His invocation still resounding,

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam.

Spellbinding. Magnificent.

This time, Hiram finds himself face to face with the being. A luminous body. Extraordinarily sharp features. A young man. Thick bushy black beard. Fierce look in his eyes. He wears a helmet and breast plates, shining gold. Fitted in his belt, a strange weapon like an axe with three heads.

Interrupting his chanting, the being turns towards Hiram. "*Why are you looking at me like that?*" he says in an irascible voice. "*Get out of here!*"

Point-anchored in the mathematical strength of Revelation Sky, Hiram contemplates him with curiosity.

Raising a menacing fist, the being threatens, "*Get, out, of, here!*"

Where is Serah? Out of sight.

Down in the solar system, Varga announces, "Within scanner range in 20 seconds..."

Preparing himself to marude the torpedo, Hiram Point-lifts himself higher up in Revelation Sky, in the archetypal region from which the enemy tapped the A^&~ language. Mathematical perfection. A clear sea of archetypes.

Lo! Right in front of Hiram, the same being. Chanting,

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam.

"10 seconds..."

Exasperated, the being stops chanting, "*You again?*"

Totally focussed on the archetypal field, Hiram doesn't even notice that the being has stopped his invocation and is looking at him.

"Locking onto the torpedos..." Varga holds his breath, "...now!"

Only 4 minutes left before the Alfredos hit the Hallelujah, 8 before the Z-101s arrive.

One in Point-ness, Hiram and Serah follow the scanner's signal and reach the torpedos. Hiram immediately identifies a P-21-like 5D model ruling both torpedoes at the same time. He starts mapping it.

"*No! No!*" the being shakes his head disdainfully. "*You don't know what you're doing!*"

Hiram ignores him. In the torpedos' superastral model, he first comes across a sea of tiny hyper-spheres. Around a 3D obelisk-shaped axis, a great multiplicity of shapes are dancing. The model's heart?

"One of the torpedoes is slowing down!" Varga announces. Then, surprised, "Exploding!"

Too far from the Hallelujah and Serah to create any damage. Malfunction?

From the moment of the explosion, the superastral model becomes unstable. The obelisk and the hyperspheres have disappeared. Each time a new shape appears it vanishes before Hiram can Point-catch hold of it.

"The torpedo is in firing range of the Hallelujah!"

With its invalidated model, the torpedo doesn't stand a chance – or so it would seem. But when the Hallelujah's 21 batteries of phasers start firing, the Big Alfredo stands firm, as if its model was fully operational.

"Torpedo will hit the Hallelujah in 2 minutes," Varga says. "Our ETA on the scene is 4 minutes."

High in Revelation Sky, the being scorns, "*Serah is wrong, you're not worth a thing!*"

Hiram ignores him. Calling upon Barkhan Seer's power, he unleashes a torrent of superastral fire onto the model, creating complete chaos. But the model was already in chaos. It keeps withstanding the Hallelujah's fire, darting through zone 20E, coming dangerously close.

Help, mathematical sky!

In mathematical sky, the being grabs Hiram by the shoulders and with amazing strength, throws him down to the ground, "*You don't deserve to be helped!*"

His Point off balance, Hiram loses touch with Serah. Quickly getting up, he shouts, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"*Get away, worm! You don't deserve to be here,*" the being answers.

Outraged, "I don't deserve to be in mathematical sky? I'd like to see that! Who d'you think you are?"

"*A god! And this is* my *world. Now, disappear from* my *world, or I am going to show you what a god can do when he is angry.*"

Varga announces, "Torpedo exploding!"

Thank God, Serah made it! He's managed to crash the model.

But too late. The torpedo has come too close.

Mother of the Light!

On the flight deck, Hiram watches the holograph in consternation. A fast-growing cloud of fire, spreading through zone 20E.

Time slows down.

On Hiram's holograph, there are 5 millimetres separating the wave's outer rim from the Hallelujah and Serah.

In MS7 controllers' room, the Panther is watching the same holograph. So are hundreds of officers in their ships throughout Philadelphian space.

Slowly – it seems – the deadly cloud grows. The space between it and the craft is shrinking. From 5 millimetres to 4. Down to 3, 2... 1.

At 1 millimetre, time slows down further.

Hiram knows exactly what the Panther looks like now. She is standing very straight, and she doesn't appear tense. Except for the two small vertical lines in the lower middle of her forehead, but no one notices.

Panther, Panther! My love with you. Endless love.

From the Point, Hiram can feel – she receives his warmth. Meanwhile the greedy red cloud is licking the edge of the Hallelujah, gradually engulfing it, then engulfing Serah's Scalene. And it keeps growing. Another 2... 3... 4 millimetres. Then it stops.

"Doesn't mean they're dead!" Varga says.

No. Just that the space around them has turned red. They are immersed in a sea of fire.

In a totally calm voice, the Panther calls, "MS7 to White Eagle. Do you read me?"

No answer. The fleet is listening, holding its breath.

Hiram is holding the Panther's Point. As if she was in his arms.

The sea of fire is now fast receding, freeing the ships, vanishing.

She calls, "MS7 to Hallelujah. Do you read me?"

An exhilarated female voice, "Hallelujah to MS7. We are alive! The 25 of us! No structural damage."

Then, miraculously, "White Eagle to MS7. Reading you 5 out of 10."

Throughout the Philadelphian space, the knights are clapping their hands.

"Panther to White Eagle. I can't read your DA from here. Report!"

"Can't read it either. I expect major structural damage. My right wing has broken off..." An interruption then, "..fire in my left wing. 90% of environmental systems are off line."

"White Eagle, now I'm receiving your full Damage Assessment... *Evacuate immediately!* Your Scalene could blow up any second. Hiram will pick up your space capsule in 90 seconds."

An easy procedure. The space capsule is a self-propelled 3 metre-long cylinder. Not unlike a suppository, it is designed to reach a similarly-shaped docking station found at the back of all Scalene fighters.

"Panther to Hiram. Your orders are: take delivery of the capsule, and head back to MS7 immediately."

"Hiram to Panther. Acknowledged."

"Panther to White Eagle. Do you read me?"

No answer.

Varga announces, "I'm receiving the Hallelujah's full DA. 82% of their tactical systems are off line. Against 11 Z fighters, I don't give them 3 minutes. The ship will be shred to pieces long before the Blue Flames arrive."

Sad, but there is not much Hiram can do about it.

"Panther to White Eagle. Do you read me?"

Still no answer.

From the Point, Hiram can feel – she's calling with her Point,

Come on, Serah! Come on!

Communication blank

"Hallelujah to MS7. We've located the space capsule. Its propulsion system is off line. We're sending a space-shuttle to rescue him."

The capsule's propulsion system being off line, its environmental systems could well be off line too. Meaning death by suffocation.

But from the Panther's Point, Hiram knows. *He is alive!*

There is a major problem. Space shuttles cannot connect a space capsule to a Scalene fighter. All they can do is bring it back to the Hallelujah.

So Serah can get butchered with them.

Varga announces, "Z-101s within scanner range in 30 seconds. Within firing range in 3.5 minutes."

Apocalypse – from Hour of God to Hour of God.

Resting on Barkhan Seer's net, Hiram calls on Thunder.

High in Revelation Sky's archetypal regions, he finds himself face to face with that young man who calls himself a god. Again.

Furious, the god yells at him, "*I told you I didn't want you here!*"

"Leave me alone! I've got work to do."

The god threatens, "*Out of here, insect! Or you die!*" Contemptuously, he makes an evocative gesture with his thumb, as if crushing an ant.

Down there in the 333, Hiram is small, weak and not especially handsome. But here in mathematical sky he is a formidable force. Ignoring the warning, he calls, "Help, magnificent sky! I *know* there is a way of destroying 11 Z fighters in one go. If Rosher can do it, so can you. Show me!"

Again, the god grabs him and throws him on the ground.

Hiram gets up, "Out of my way or I'll kill you."

The god no longer looks angry. He is interested, "*You mean you would dare fight against a god?*" Laughing like a Sun going nova, "*Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!*"

Mathematical certitude: this young man is about as stubborn as the Panther. He won't let go. He needs a lesson. Where is his superastral model?

Point-scanning the summits of Revelation Sky.

There it is – the god's archetype. Hiram doesn't even bother scanning it. He smashes it, as if with a gigantic hammer.

Unexpected result: the god isn't defeated, his size has grown exponentially. His head now reaches the high regions of Revelation Sky. With his fist, he threatens to hit Hiram.

Fine! Let's find his archetype's archetype.

Hiram rises. Above him, infinity breathes. An instant ascension. What seemed to be the summit of Revelation Sky a second ago now appears like an insignificant dream, far below. What seemed gigantic is now nothing more than a dot at Hiram's feet. Engage eternity. The fire of the Golden Sun shines through my eye. I have conquered! There are no limits. Here is the god's archetype's archetype. Let's call it his second involution root – *ir2*.

Stepping into his own *ir2*, Hiram makes himself a raging fire and attacks the god's *ir2*.

Gigantic, hissing flames. A loud explosion, high in the heavens.

Threatened, the god is forced to reveal his nature. He too is an incandescent might. Now, who will burn who?

In fire, immortality is concealed. Expanding one step higher in the ladder of the worlds, Hiram looks for the god's *ir3*. Rolling Thunder. Sleep is dead, the titan has awakened. I am walking on the edge. Mother of the Light, protect my way. When the god matches him on the *ir3* level, Hiram involutes further, from *ir3* to *ir4*, the Exusiai are angels with awesome powers, the creation is waking from her dream, from *ir4* to *ir5* there is nothing left but fire, the god is still fighting, it is the early morning of the creation, many worlds are still to appear, jump from *irn* to *ir∞*, sweeping through the infinity of worlds in the uppermost regions of Revelation Sky.

To *ir∞* – where the creation ends.

Edge of Highness. Whiteness eternal. Forever love.

"Z-101s within scanner range in 10 seconds... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1..."

At the Edge of Highness, the Eagle's love is an all-consuming fire.

Hiram is one with the god. One with the Eagle.

One with infinity, he holds the triaxe in his hand and pours the Eagle's incandescent love onto the Z-101s' models.

Firing twelve consecutive volleys of ten Sting missiles.

On the holograph of MS7's flight controllers, the Sting missiles appear as a cloud of green dots coming out of Hiram's Scalene. Moving towards the Z-101s.

"He's going to do it!" The Panther's Point has caught a glimpse of Hiram's ascension. She raises both fists. Louder, "He's going to *do* it!"

The other twenty-one flight controllers remain dead silent, watching the holograph. In the middle, the Hallelujah. On the left, Hiram's Scalene. On the right, the Z-101s. They'll ETA the Hallelujah in 2.5 minutes.

The cloud of green dots is passing over the Hallelujah.

The muffled voice announces, "Z-101 fighters are firing Beth missiles."

Red dots coming out of the Z-101s.

The green cloud and the red cloud are colliding. No they're not. Something weird happens. They pass through each other. Not one single missile explodes.

And louder, "I tell you he's made it!" The Panther is shouting, "Look at this! Look!"

The Beth missiles haven't been able to stop *one* Sting. Now they're on their way to nowhere. They'll travel for some time, until Sun gravity catches them.

Meanwhile the green dots are closing in on the Z-101s.

Eerie silence in the controllers' room.

Her lips tightly closed, her eyes ablaze, the Panther looks upwards.

Soon, a flabbergasted lieutenant announces, "Target 1, destroyed. Target 2, destroyed. Target 3..."

By the shore of the Molten Sea, Kartendranath and Hiram are dancing the triaxe dance.

"...Target 7, destroyed. Target 8, destroyed..."

Together, they are chanting the invocation,

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana, Nam Nam.

"Target 10, destroyed. Target 11, destroyed. Sector 20E is now clear."

The man shouts, "Fuck! Have you seen this panel? Computer, confirm score!"

The muffled voice answers, "During engagement ZRV-X87-09 in sector 20E, Lieutenant Elmian's maruding score was 997."

The officer is shaking his head in disbelief, "Fuck! But fuck! How can someone possibly score 997? This kid is maruding like a god!"

He's not the only one to be incredulous. On the flight deck of his 333, Commander Gideon is scratching his lustrous scalp, "Gideon to Hiram. Has my DAU gone completely off its brain or did you *really* shoot 11 Z-101s with nothing but Sting missiles? Confirm."

Hiram remains silent.

The answer comes from MS7, "Black Panther to Gideon. Maruding score 997 is confirmed. Hiram is king of No Limits."

3.32 Wednesday 16:32 (ETA 34.6 hours) A god's smile

When Serah walks onto the flight deck of Hiram's 333, he finds Hiram sitting cross-legged in the central chair, absorbed in profound concentration.

"TOP brother! Want a copilot?"

Hiram slowly opens his eyes, revealing an incandescent gaze. Majestic like a cluster of spiral galaxies, vast like the sea of prime matter, simple like 2 + 2 = 4. It tells a thousand legends from a thousand worlds. It holds more mysteries than a man can comprehend in a thousand lifetimes.

"Voof!" Serah bursts out laughing. It's what Masters of Thunder do in moments like this one. His knight's suit is in tatters. There are patches of caked blood on the back of his head, bruises and cuts all over his face, large burns on his left forearm and thigh. His Point is shining with the Golden Sun. "But what have you done in this space?" he asks, as if he didn't know.

The flight deck is super-charged with presence. A combination of White Eagle and Flying Dragons – white light as in the creation's first second, and mind-blowing blueness...

...from beyond the Abyss of the Deep and the Fault of Eternity.

Hiram answers with a smile. A god's smile, packed with infinite knowing. It tells more than a thousand discourses. It reminds Serah of human beings' divine origin.

Space Matrix access granted. Fly, Dragon!

Hiram closes his eyes again.

"I see!" Using a mindboard, Serah quickly checks the navigational systems. The course is set to MS7. The Scalene is moving at full speed. No adjustments are required. His Point stumbles on Multi-V. Three channels are active, on which clones of Hiram are busy answering messages.

Serah sits on Hiram's right and invokes the gravito-chair's medicomputer. "Establish priority link to Dr Elchevarra, access code #MS7-26-21-01."

P@ immediately appears, "Hi Serah!" She's not looking at him, she's too busy analysing the readings. "Nothing broken... No signs of irradiation... The

burns aren't too bad... There are a few metal fragments in your left arm. And your third kidney has taken a beating. I may have to take it out."

He shrugs, "Who needs three kidneys, anyway!"

Still not looking at him, "You asshole scared the shit out of us! Why did you have to stay there? Couldn't you back off when the fucking Zs turned up?"

"It's classified. I can't talk about it."

"Classified my ass! Don't move. It's going to hurt!" P@ threatens him, as if seeking revenge.

He laughs.

She yells, "Don't move, I said!"

He stops laughing and becomes Dragon-still.

She starts removing the metal fragments from his arm, operating his medicomputer through remote control. The medicomputer could easily have done it by itself, but Serah is fussy. Apart from P@, he never allows anyone to mess with his body.

Expectedly, it was an empty threat. The surgery is totally painless.

He closes his eyes for a few seconds and relaxes. Sitting in Hiram's presence is like being held in the wings of the Eagle.

From Archive Hall Seventeen.

Mindswitching another VR channel, he calls, "White Eagle to Panther, protected channel. Do you love me?"

She appears in front of him, "Panther to White Eagle, protected. Madly!" She watches his bruised face without reacting.

"Are you free tonight?"

She pushes her lips forwards. "I could be."

"Want to come with me to No Limits? It's a date. Say yes!"

Truly, fully, forever, "Yes!"

A protected incoming communication reaches the 333. Hiram's Multi-V gets engaged automatically, routing the message to a separate reality.

"Lavash, protected. It's good to see you, Serah." The admiral's parched face is nearly smiling.

"It's good to see you, Admiral."

"Are you in one piece?"

"The damage is purely cosmetic. Just a visit to my beautician and you won't be able to notice a thing."

The admiral is visibly relieved. "Did Elmian really marude at 997?"

"Sure did. I warned you, Admiral. The descenders are coming of age. Expect more of this in the coming days."

In the 5th battle of Mercury for the first time, fully trained units of descenders will be taking part in large-scale tactical engagements.

"When do we get your final word on operation Reunion?" Serah presses on.

"Before 23:00 hours. Is Elmian ready?"

Serah smiles, "A score of 997 speaks for itself, doesn't it?"

"Yes and no," Lavash is cautious. NBY people always are. "This kid's never been to war."

"Now he has."

"A hell of a lot is going to depend on him in the coming 48 hours. Could get pretty hot around Philadelphia 6. How is he now? In shock, or holding it?" Lavash asks.

Serah replies by broadcasting visuals of Hiram. Now his eyes are open, fixed in front of him, as a god who contemplates the horizon by the shore of the Molten Sea. Serene like the morning of creation. Absolutely centred.

"And he's not even eighteen!" Lavash nods, thoughtful.

Serah knows only to well, "War does things like that to people."

Lavash grins, "S'gonna be time for old chaps like me to resign. I just don't have the brains to match my lieutenants!" EOC.

Serah laughs affectionately.

On channel 1, P@ shouts at him, "But are you going to sit still, for God's sake?"

"Sorry!"

"T's all right. Anyhow, I've finished. For now! I'll come to pick you up on docking station 1. I've booked a room for you at MS7's central hospital."

"Thanks P@!"

She gives him a motherly look and EOCs.

Terminating all his com channels, Serah lies in his chair. Resting. Watching Hiram, whose Point is still sparked with the wonders of Revelation Sky.

The silence is packed. There is no need for words.

3.33 Wednesday 18:04 (ETA 33 hours) In the arms of a goddess

On docking station 1, the Scalene 333 is now on standstill. P@ and Marek erupt into the flight deck. They find Serah on his feet. Hiram is still sitting cross-legged in the central chair.

P@ is hit by the denseness of the silence. "Djeezus! What have you been doing in here?"

Hiram gets up, directs his gaze onto her, and smiles.

"Oh!" she exclaims ecstatically. "How do you expect me to work if you do things like that to me?" Regaining her professional countenance, "You lie down here!" she tells Serah, pointing to a gravito-litter.

"Yes, *sir!*" Serah lets himself fall into the moving gravito-field. Marek moves towards him, offering his flat hand. Serah slaps it with his flat hand. They don't talk, just look into each other's eyes.

Meanwhile, the doctor is reading Hiram's vital functions with a hand-held scanner. "Stop looking at me like that, I'm going to melt!" she complains, trying to concentrate on the readings.

Hiram puts his hand on her shoulder. His smile makes her feel ten million years old. Moved, she interrupts her scanning. She makes herself soft to look at him.

Taking her high in the spheres. Realms of fire. A dancing god is a universe in motion.

"Djeezus! Djeezus!" she shakes her head. Then, "I wish I could stay with you but the surgeons are waiting for us." She sets off, Serah's gravito-litter

floating in the air behind her. "I probably won't be out of the theatre until late. But you can still invite me to No Limits if you want," she tells Hiram, while taking Serah to the docking station at the back of the craft.

Marek stays on the flight deck. "I thought I'd come to give you a hand. You know what's waiting for you out there, don't you?" the tall man with the devastating dark eyes and the thick black moustache grins.

Hiram gives a nod, luminous confidence shining through his smile.

It is Marek's turn to be projected high into the spheres. It makes him laugh. He knows the feeling well. He too is a friend of Kartendranath. He too has handled the triaxe. Many times.

Marek gives a handclap, "Tonight, I invite you to a Dragon dance!"

From the omniscient knowingness of the gods, Hiram knows this handclap seals a turning point in his time line. Now, he no longer belongs to the Himalayan choir. He is one of the Molten Stars. A chapter of his life is closed. There is no turning back.

Sanctioning the decree of the Lords of Destiny with another nod, Hiram walks to the door of the Scalene. Marek follows, ready to be his bodyguard.

In the gigantic hangar, 568 people have gathered for a 'reception'. Standing at the top of the flight of steps, Hiram doesn't even have to count them. He simply *knows* there are 568, with 221 pilots among them. Holding a crowd is the simplest thing in the world. From his point, Hiram matches their combined Pointness, lifting them in Revelation Sky.

An awesome silence dawns on docking station 1.

Only three seconds. In the worlds of fire, three seconds can stretch over an aeon. Down here, it's a time crossing. Serah, on his way to MS7's central hospital, remembers Eisraim. His last night with Elyani. The great ascension ritual, which led to his first encounter with Kartendranath. Gods! What a beating he took! But if it hadn't been for this beating, Hiram wouldn't be here now. In the grand workings of time, every event is a necessary link of the chain of causality. In front of Hiram's eye, 13,000 years of history packed in an instant.

Virginia, I am on my way! Hold on! Just a little more.

Hiram raises his right fist, "Hey, Barkhan Seer!"

The crowd responds with an ovation, "Hiram! Hiram! Hiram! Hiram..!"

He laughs with their joy, walks down the steps, lets himself be carried in triumph.

"Hiram! Hiram! Hiram..!"

Seeing Hiram coping so well, Marek lets events follow their course. The feeling in docking station 1 is extremely high. Hiram's 997 score is the most auspicious omen that could occur at the onset of the 5th battle of Mercury.

It sends the message to the descenders – the Sons of Apollo are with them.

Something extraordinary is about to happen.

When they arrive at the lifts, Marek manages to grab Hiram by the waist and bring him down to floor level. He reserves an empty lift by mindswitching priority access codes, and "Thank you very much everybody! We'll continue to-

night at No Limits!" Colonel Elchevarra has the muscle and the authority to keep the crowd out.

Now he and Hiram are alone in the lift. They're not talking. Marek likes people who can not talk. There are so few of them in this world. While walking to Hiram's cabin, the two Molten Stars enjoy their silence.

At the cabin's door, Marek offers his flat hand to Hiram, "Get ready for the Dragon dance. Tonight's celebrations at No Limits will be wild!"

Hiram slaps Marek's hand with his flat hand.

He leaves Marek with one last nod, and gets into his cabin.

There he redlights the door, lets himself fall into his gravito field, and engages Multi-V. Eleonor and Virginia are waiting for him on channel 1. He VRs himself straight into Eleonor's arms, and bursts into tears.

She holds him against her, gently rocking him, "It's okay! It's finished. Serah is all right, now."

She's watched the news.

Hiram is trembling. A complete collapse. The lofty spheres of the gods are like a quickly-fading dream in the early morning. The fire is extinguished. Down here, in the cold, he is left like a heap of brown puree. There is nothing to hold him. Only Eleonor and Virginia.

Eleonor VRs a purple sofa with large silk cushions. She sits on one side, holding him in her arms. Virginia sits on the other side, her magic hands on Hiram's back, caressingly holding his shoulders.

"We're here with you," Eleonor whispers. "It's all fine, now."

Hiram can't stop sobbing. "I don't know what's happening to me!"

The ground is giving way under his feet. Emptiness beyond recall. "I don't understand what's happened. I don't even know who this being was."

"What being?" Eleonor asks.

"He said he was a god. He attacked me, then he gave me the strength to save Serah." It feels *so good* to cry against Eleonor's breast. He takes her hand in his left hand, his right hand searching for Virginia.

She finds him, and leans against him in a family hug.

He sobs, "I'm so glad I have you two! What would I be if you were not with me?"

Ring at the cabin door.

Hiram frowns, "Ah, fuck! Can't they see the red light is on?"

Two more rings.

Virginia gets a visual lock on the corridor. "It's my Mum!" she announces. "She's alone."

"The Panther?" Hiram sits up. "But I can't possibly receive her like this!"

"Maybe the Panther knows exactly what's happening to you," Eleonor is thinking fast. "It might be wise to speak to her. She's your instructor."

"And your friend," Virginia adds. "I agree. I think you should see her."

Hiram trusts the wise women, but... "But I'm not presentable!" he quickly wipes his tears. What's the point? He is still crying.

Three more rings. The Panther hates waiting.

"I'd rather see her in VR!" Hiram feels like escaping. Everything.

"No!" Virginia is adamant. "This is the kind of situation where nothing can replace RR."

"She's right. We're going!" Eleonor decides. She kisses him on the cheek, "Just let go. She'll take care of you." And the two women disappear from Hiram's reality.

Hiram is left with no choice but to drag himself out of his gravito-field and open the cabin door.

The Panther stands in the doorway. She is particularly beautiful tonight. Shining with the light that Hiram has just lost.

When you are ugly and miserable, down here, catching a glimpse of the perfection of higher worlds can be so heart-breaking.

Hiram is fighting hard to block his tears. What for? The Panther isn't an ON inspector, for the Almighty's sake. He finds himself stupid.

"May I come in?" she asks.

"Please."

She steps in and takes a quick look at the cabin with bare walls and a mattress as the only piece of furniture. The door closes itself behind her.

"Hiram," she announces, "the other day you asked me about descenders having babies." Looking straight into his eyes, her voice is dancing, "So I thought I'd tell you: I am pregnant! But you'd better keep your mouth shut, because at the moment only three people know: Serah, you and I."

Letting the ON inspectors disappear into his past, Hiram is biting his lip, crying the tears of a free man.

"Where does one sit, here?" she asks.

"Er... I usually don't have many visitors."

Closing her eyes for a sec, she mindswitches an AR-garden on the walls, and two armchair-looking gravito-fields for them to sit on.

What a clever idea! Hiram had never thought about that.

"Er..." Hiram remembers the VR prog on RR good manners. "Please, sit down!" he formally invites her.

Making her voice more formal, "Thank you, Knight Hiram!" Then, "You can sit down too."

Of course!

She puts both hands on her belly, "It's a boy!"

Hiram looks at her in complete wonder. How can such a divine creature confide in him?

He would like to respond. Give her something. But down here, there is nothing left of him. All he can do is call on the blueness and match her from the presence.

Eagle's feathers and endless love.

Spark in the Panther's eyes, "But how do you do that? Come on! I told you my secret, now you tell me yours!" She makes her smile playful, "How do you do it? How do you bring down her presence?"

"Er... her presence?"

"That's it," she turns her palms and her eyes skywards, "now he's going to tell me, 'what was the name of this daughter of yours, by the way?'"

Still in tears, Hiram finds himself smiling.

She reminds him with an insistent gaze, "The first time we met you asked me, 'Why would real people want to play games?'"

The poor little magard had a lot to learn about life.

"All right! I'll tell you everything!" He blows his nose in his fingers and wipes them on his softmetal trousers. Virtual tissues don't work on RR noses. "Once," he begins.

Wait a minute. What is he doing? He can't possibly...

"Once..." the Panther echoes. It's clear she isn't going to let go.

"All right. Once, when I was just about dead, Szar told me about Virginia. I don't know what happened, but it did something to me. Like a click. I don't have words for this. All I can say is, I wanted to know her. I think it was the first time in my life I *really* wanted something. It was wonderful! It gave me the strength to stay alive. After that, all the work I did on the P-21 was for her. And for you. During my descent process, I thought about her all the time. *All the time!* She was with me. She became clearer and clearer. And I *knew* she could feel me. Like now, for instance."

Traveller's memories. Home is packed with stars.

The cabin is filled with the marvellous blueness.

I will love you through the Cosmic Night.

Commander Elyani Serah has tears in her eyes.

"Right now, I *know* she can feel me!" Hiram speaks with absolute certitude. The Panther's tears make him cry again, "And I know that feeling me is keeping her alive. Because I'm all she's got. They have taken everything away from her. But they can't take me away! She is right at the core of my being."

The Panther gets up and pulls him by the hand.

The Forever Love legend is alive.

Now they are crying in each other's arms.

"I'm going to get her out of there! I swear on my life!" he declares, fierce. "With her I can be the White Eagle! The enemy may be powerful, but against the White Eagle he is nothing."

Epochs pass, legends live on.

There are powers greater than sleep and oblivion.

Hiram feels compelled to ask, "The being who came to meet me during the battle, you know him don't you?"

"I do. He is Kartendranath. One of the Sons of Apollo." Her tears fall on his cheek like rain from Revelation Sky.

"And you are one of them too," he intuits.

Holding him against her, keeping her eyes closed, "Yes."

Not a surprise. He had always known she was a goddess.

"You realise this is *very* classified, Hiram."

Hiram is out of his mind. Being in her arms is like bathing in a sea of celestial archetypes. Old sorrows are being washed away. New webs of hope are

being woven. There is something in her that speaks to the innermost kernel of his being. He finds her immensely inspiring, mathematically magnificent. He could write theorem after theorem for her.

"Hiram, one of the things I had come to tell you is that you are the king of No Limits. It means you have five hundred guests coming for dinner," she tenderly moves her cheek against his hair. "You don't have to worry, Grand Palam can take care of the practicalities. He'll tell you what you need to know. But you must go there now, to prepare yourself. Also... it's quite normal for pilots to hit rock-bottom after the high of a sortie. No Limits has special HR programs to put you back on track."

"Actually, I'm starting to feel quite good."

"Doesn't matter. You'll follow the prog anyway."

Hiram is flying again. "I don't think I need it."

She lets go of him and reopens her eyes, "It's an order, Lieutenant!"

Startled, "Yes, *sir*!"

"Hiram, do you know what I think?"

"No, sir."

"Virginia... is going to adore you." A goddess' smile, "But it's just my personal opinion. I can't speak for her of course. Okay brother, I'll see you at No Limits." She takes off.

She likes clear-cut endings. It's her style.

Alone in the cabin, Hiram breathes the enchanted fragrance the Panther has left behind her. "Aaaah!" Sigh. Flutter. It's virtual spring in Hiram's heart.

Elias the impeccably-dressed virtual accountant turns up on channel 1, "Hiram, my boy, I need to speak to you. It's urgent."

Today he's wearing an old-fashioned gangster's hat. Boy, does he look greasy! Especially with these ridiculously large rings on his fingers and that red carbuncle that's about to disgorge mayonnaise down the side of his nose.

"Can't talk to you now, I'm on my way out." Hiram is already walking across the doorway.

Elias ARs himself into the corridor, pursuing him, "Just a minute! It's about your will. You don't have a will at the moment."

"A what?"

"A will. It's a legal document that tells what's to happen to your assets in case you kick the bucket. See, my boy, you're flying real missions now. Ya never know what tomorrow will bring. Especially in this region of the solar system."

Elias too has been watching the news.

"I'll give it some thought." Hiram mindswitches the VAC off.

Elias ARs himself back behind Hiram, "Listen, your partner Luke... he's freaking out. He wants you to sort out the legal documents ASAP. There's some real money, here. We need to appoint someone with a serious sense of business."

Hiram tunes into the VAC's superastral model, ready to smite.

Boy! What a greasy archetype!

"So when can I get it?" Elias presses on.

Hiram breathes deeply, remembering the White Eagle. "I'll speak to my Mum and let you know."

3.34 Wednesday 19:20 (ETA 31.8 hours) Grand Palam and I

Tonight, no door. No wall. At the end of the corridor, Hiram walks into a large hall flanked with two rows of thirty-three columns. The same tessellated pavement on the floor. A funny kind of table in the centre of the hall.

The altar of the twelve-star masters.

"Welcome back, Master Hiram!" Grand Palam's extravagantly melodious voice greets him.

Frown, "'Master' Hiram? I thought I was King Hiram."

"Walk to the altar in front of you. Place both hands on the stone."

A luminous egg has appeared on the altar. About the size of a human head. Light blue. The colour of Revelation Sky.

Hiram walks towards it.

Truth and Fire. Fire and Truth. I am walking on the edge.

"One hand on each side," Grand Palam guides him.

The hall's acoustics are superb. It adds a grand touch to the voice.

Hiram places one hand on each side of the egg. No particular sensation. It's just light.

The explosion of all limits that leads to the Edge of Highness.

"Now, look above your head, Hiram."

Lo! twelve silvery stars. Just like Master Gideon.

Puzzled, "What does this mean?"

Grand Palam's voice deepens, "Can't you guess?"

A thousand times I have performed this ritual.

Suddenly, there is an air of familiarity about the two rows of columns.

"I have... I have been here before, haven't I?"

"Oh, yes, Master Hiram. Many, many times."

Time is a dream. Long-haired Takhar is standing by the River of Remembrance. I left my keys at No Limits.

"Where are my keys?" Hiram asks, without knowing why.

"They will be returned to you during the grand reinstallation ceremony."

"What's a grand reinstallation ceremony?"

"The ritual in which you will be officially recognised as the reincarnation of a twelve-star master of No Limits," Grand Palam replies. "But before convening a meeting with the Grand Council of No Limits, my advice would be to wait till the battle is over. Meanwhile, you retain the regalia above your head. And of course you are granted unrestricted access to all Archive emanations."

From Archive Hall Seventeen, straight into Virginia's mind.

"How did you identify me?"

"When you first came here, your Point signature was immediately picked up as that of a potential reincarnated master. I then alerted Master Gideon and Master Benai, who both recognised you," Grand Palam answers.

River of Remembrance. Flowing from infinity to infinity.

Between Hiram's two hands, the egg is pulsing like a heart.

"Can you tell me about that past life?" he asks.

"You left full records, in anticipation of your return. But Hiram, let me ask you first: what do you want tonight?"

Instant answer, "By 24:00, High Command will give me my instructions for a mission. It's the mission of my life. All I want is to be ready."

"In that case, I would suggest you delay watching your past-life records."

Anxiously, "Was it a bad life?"

"No. There are two past-life records, by the way. I would say they are magnificent. But if your aim is to be ready for the battle, then my advice is to wait. Watching the past is sometimes unsettling, even – or perhaps especially – magnificent lives."

That makes Hiram feel good.

"Acknowledged. So what do I do now? I've been told I have 500 guests coming for dinner. Hate to imagine how much RR food they're going to require!"

"Actually, since I didn't receive any instructions from you I took the liberty of organising a barbecue. Master Marek informed me a Dragon dance was on. Mixed grills usually go well with Mount Lohrzen's dining hall."

"Good. Now, what else shall I worry about?"

"Hiram, we are to celebrate, not to worry."

Hiram shakes his head intransigently, "It's war. Only the paranoid survive."

Grand Palam laughs, "Well then, the next item to worry about is your friends. Who would you like to invite?"

"Well... my Mum and my girlfriend... Ooops! No! Not my girlfriend, of course. Szar of the Brown Robe, Colonel Varga..."

"Where do I find your mother?" Grand Palam inquires. "There are no relatives of yours listed in the directories of the Philadelphias."

"Dr Eleonor Mazbrouk. She's a clone."

"Mm... you might create some embarrassment for yourself if you invite a clone to No Limits," the voice warns.

"Don't then. Let's invite Dr Patricia Elchevarra, the Himalayan choir..."

"The Himalayans are knights. They do not require an invitation."

"Listen, Grand Palam," Hiram is already tired with so much etiquette. "Why don't I let you organise everything? You look to me like you've got this place pretty much under control. So, all I want is to be shielded from RR smells, and plenty of privacy. A private tent, perhaps, or something."

Confident voice, "It will be done, King. Just walk in. The place is yours."

"Much obliged!" Hiram lets go of the luminous egg and walks to the end of the hall. He quickly looks up, to make sure his stars are following. They are.

"Hiram?" the living voice calls.

"Grand Palam!" Hiram stops, wondering what next.

"It's good to have you back."

Smile. Virtual spring is blossoming. "It's good to be back."

Hiram runs with joy to the door at the end of the hall. He has a strange feeling of knowing. The problem is, he doesn't know what it is that he knows. Grand Palam has created an interesting dark space for him. No walls, no ceiling, and no floor – or so it seems. All you can see is your own body.

Master Benai walks into his reality. She's not dressed as a knight but with a shirt and thin trousers made of black cloth. She wears a black round cap shaped as a flat cone, 10.5 cm high and 21 cm in diameter. She's normally ugly today, like RR people are. Her three stars are floating above her cap.

Hiram is aware he wasn't very friendly last time they met, so he makes an effort to be especially polite, "Master Benai! How *are* you today?"

She too is in a conciliatory mood. She smiles at him, "Good, Master Hiram. Grand Palam has sent me to answer your questions."

"How good of you to come and visit! Such nice weather today."

Light frown, like she is being played the wrong prog.

Lord Gana, playing the molten star by the shore of the Molten Sea.

"All right," Hiram gives up on the bit about the cup of tea and moves on. "First question, did you know me in a past life?"

"No."

Suspiciously, "Well then how could you recognise me?"

A thousand times I lost you. A thousand times I found you again.

She smiles again. A beautiful smile. There is something special about her lips. A profoundly human quality. Unconditional heartness. "The Point of key-holders has a certain light, a certain flavour."

"What's a key?" Hiram closes his eyes. There are hundreds of years to remember. But where to start?

The woman whose head is in the stars, her feet in your time track.

"Archive keys are used to spark virtual emanations," Benai answers. "They give virtual clones their presence."

"Like Szar of the Brown Robe, or Colonel Varga?"

"Exactly. Aparalgon-Varga, the enlightened master, is in the Archive in the World to Come. Down here, for virtual clones of Varga to have presence, they must resonate with his immortal Spirit. Keys are seeds of power by which clones are connected to their original in the Fields of Peace."

"Does this mean the masters of No Limits are in charge of presencing all virtual emanations used by the knights?"

"Exactly. They are the presence keepers."

"Boy! That's a responsibility." Hiram reopens his eyes, only to discover he is no longer wearing his knight's suit but a shirt, pants and a cap like Benai's. "Shit! No Limits did it to me again! How does that happen, exactly? They're RR clothes, aren't they?"

Benai adds a touch of irony to her smile. "Can't you guess?"

"No Limits is a huge gravito-tank. We are all immersed in it?"

"True. But only part of the truth," she answers.

Spaces packed with stars. Flash of absolute certitude, *liquid light*, Hiram remembers, "I was a key-holder for the Flying Dragons!"

A White Eagle invested with all the powers of Archive Hall Seventeen.

"But what's a Flying Dragon, exactly?" Hiram asks.

"Flying Dragons are cosmic intelligences who live in remote spheres," Benai explains. "Sometimes they come and visit us."

"Alien kind of stuff?"

"Negative. Flying Dragons don't have physical bodies or spacecraft. They are purely astral intelligences. Intelligences of gigantic magnitude. Extraordinarily ancient."

Hiram wants to know, "Can one have a Flying Dragon girlfriend?"

Benai bursts out laughing. She is starting to enjoy Hiram's company.

"But I'm very serious!" he insists.

"Hiram!" She finds his spontaneity totally disarming. Grave, "Hiram, have you ever heard of the Forever Love legend?"

"Never."

With all my heart, with all my mind, I am with you...

"Wait!" he exclaims. "Somehow, it's reminiscent of... mm... no, I'm not sure. What was that legend about, exactly?"

"You could call it a cross-cultural exchange between the White Eagle and the Flying Dragons from beyond the Abyss of the Deep and the Fault of Eternity. It was warm. Very warm."

"Yes! Yes!" Hiram eurekas. "I know one of them well!" he clicks his fingers. Using one of his keys, he floods their reality with Virginia's presence.

The darkness disappears, replaced by a mind-blowing blue quality that makes your Point run in all directions, and much faster than a Scalene 333, *time is to-and-froing*, Master Benai feels like a three-year-old dancing with joy, *Space Matrix access granted*, this time there are virtually no limits, immersed in thick star clusters, *Hiram, I know you are coming, I love you, I have always loved you, I will love you through the Cosmic Night, that which is has always been and will always be, why grieve?*

Benai is slowly waving her arms, her eyes closed, like she's been heavily hit by some virtual drug. "You *are* a master of No Limits, aren't you!"

Hiram shrugs, "You tell me!"

Grand Palam's voice calls, "Hiram, I have a high-priority communication for you."

Hiram shivers, "From High Command?"

"No, from Elias Sharamollon."

"Oh, shit! But shit! Tell him to go to hell, I'll call him later." Turning to Master Benai, who's still honeymooning with the spheres of remoteness, "Listen, could I switch a prog of mine on top of this reality."

She answers as if from far, far away, "Please!"

"Is Benai your only name by the way?"

"Commander Suzy Benai," she sounds like she's really gone. In the remote astral worlds of the Flying Dragons.

"Suzy? Oh, I *love* that name!" Hiram exclaims. "When I was little I used to have a pet mouse whose name was Suzy. She was fantastic. So good to me!" Meanwhile he invokes Multi-V, "Eleonor, help! I have a problem."

On channel 1 Eleonor is here for him, totally, "What, my darling?" She is still sitting on the purple sofa.

"Elias says I have to make a will."

"This is very wise! One should always have one's will ready," Eleonor totally agrees.

"All right, then. But I don't even know how much money I have."

"Let me check," Eleonor quickly reads his bank statements, "125,000.00 credits have just been deposited into your account, bringing your balance to 787,443.45 credits. I hope you realise, that's *a lot* of money. And of course there are all your other assets."

"My assets? I thought I only had a lobster factory."

"Elias has diversified your portfolios. The grand total amounts to 7,232,444.61 credits. No, wait! A share transaction has just come through. And there is this fish supermarket around Saturn..."

"I don't need the details, just a name to put on my will. How about you?"

"No, a virtual clone can't be the recipient of a will. We must find a good cause. Someone who really needs money."

"Does the Panther have money?"

Virginia comes to sit with Eleonor on the sofa. "Hi! Are you better?"

Hiram takes her aside on channel 12, "Listen I have news for you. You're about to have a brother!"

"Wow!" she throws herself into his arms. "A brother!"

"It's a secret. Only the Panther, Serah, you and I know."

On channel 1, Virginia tells them, "My Mum doesn't have any money problems. Her family is quite well off."

"What about Amy?" Hiram asks. "Can you read her bank account?"

Eleonor shakes her head, "Bank accounts are strictly confidential."

"I'll give you a CSS code..."

"Hiram, no!" Eleonor shouts. "You do *not* do things like that!"

"But it's for a good cause!"

"No!" Virginia shouts even louder. "Do you understand? No!"

Hiram doesn't get it. "But aren't we trying to give her a present?"

"No! You just do not hack your friends' bank accounts! That is not the way real people behave!" Virginia won't compromise. "But if you want, Eleonor and I could call Amy and tell her we are friends of yours. If she's willing to chat with us, we could ask her about her financial situation."

"Psychological manipulation?" Hiram sighs, "I'd like to know how that's any better than some frank mathacking with clean algorithms."

"It's *not* manipulation!" Virginia clenches her fists and looks skywards, hissing in exasperation.

"Leave it to us, we'll call you back!" Eleonor takes the situation in hand. "Are you having fun?"

"No Limits has style! And look, I got a bonus." Hiram manifests the twelve-star regalia above his head.

"Now, what is this?" Eleonor is struck with motherly pride.

"Not completely sure yet. I'll tell you when I find out." EOC.

Touching the dark cap above his head, Hiram wonders how he could find out for sure whether the clothes he is wearing are real. Pissing in his pants would not bring any new element, so he takes Master Benai by the hand, "Come on, Suzy! I want to make an experiment!" and he starts running towards the exit, dragging her out of her meditative state.

"What are you doing?" she laughs, running behind him.

"Exploring the nature of reality!" They dart through the empty temple with the luminous eggs and the rows of columns, cross the invisible wall and find themselves in the corridor outside No Limits. They are still wearing the black costumes. They still have stars above their heads.

Hiram is totally confused, "But how come you're still here? Do you live on MS7?"

"No! I am on Philadelphia 12 at the moment."

"I get it! The gravito-field extends into the corridor!" That explains why the door is sometimes a wall.

At the other end of the corridor, metallic doors open. Seventeen knights come out of the lift. They walk down the corridor to No Limits. But they don't see Hiram, or Benai. Hiram is now an invisible cloud floating in the air just beneath the ceiling.

"Suzy, are you here?" he whispers.

"Just by your side!" she answers, in her normal voice. "A cloud, like you."

The knights can't hear her. They are passing under the transparent clouds.

Hiram asks, "What's going on now?"

"You asked for privacy, so Grand Palam made you invisible!"

The knights are disappearing through the door of No Limits. To them it's a holographic wall panel that says, "No Limits, Virtual Reality Nightclub."

Hiram and Master Benai are slowly brought down to floor level. Their physical appearances are restored.

Hiram gives a handclap, "I love it, Suzy! I love it."

Sweet and sour voice, "Hiram, do you realise that not many people call me Suzy?"

Palms upwards, "I'm the King, ain't I?"

"Kings have no jurisdiction over the masters of No Limits."

"Well then... I've got more stars than you." He grabs her hand and runs back to No Limits. Invoking, "Grand Palam, I want to be invisible!"

He and Suzy disappear. He holds her hand tightly so as not to lose her.

She chooses to laugh, "You're mad!"

"I know. It's my strength. But it's classified, I can't talk about it." They're back in the empty temple with the egg of light and the tessellated pavement. "Listen, I want to go where all the knights are," Hiram calls on Grand Palam.

At the end of the temple they reach a huge cavern where 431 people dressed in bizarre black costumes are talking loudly, sitting behind stone tables, having a great time eating burnt RR sausages and other charcoal-looking RR chunks of food.

Mount Lohrzen's dining hall.

"Ha!" Hiram laughs. "They can't see us!" Silly jubilation.

Suzy is getting into her playful character, "I can see you!"

"But that's not fair. I want to see you too!"

"No!"

"Shall we have a fight?" Hiram is already looking for her superastral model. Then, astonished, "But... but your archetype is *beau*tiful!"

"What?" Master Benai has the giggles. "Grand Palam!" Laughing out of her mind, "Grand Palam, but where did you find this individual?"

Contemplating her Pointness, Hiram goes through another flash of remembrance. There is emotion in his voice, "Suzy, wait a minute. You didn't tell me the truth. You and I *did* know each other in past lives! Several past lives. Not in the Philadelphias, though."

"Hiram, if you're trying to go out with me, you're going to have to find something more original."

"Go out with you? You must be joking. You're far too old for me!" She's at least 27, possibly even more – it's hard to tell from her superastral model.

She laughs, even louder, "Grand Palam, is this *really* happening?"

"Suzy, but it's the truth! And it's why Grand Palam sent you to me. He sensed the link between us. He knew we were friends." Hiram calls, "Isn't it true, Grand Palam?"

Grand Palam answers, "True, true. No Limits holds no records of the past lives where you met each other, but the Archive does."

Suzy makes herself visible. She is no longer laughing, but thoughtful. "Hiram, you realise that many knights have been associated during their past lives, don't you? Nothing completely extraordinary, there."

Still, she is moved. So is Hiram. He lightly passes his hand through her dark hair, a thousand forgotten dreams drifting through his mind, "Suzy, may I have your official permission to call you Suzy?"

She smiles, opening to him, "Permission granted."

"You can call me Hiram!" He turns his attention back to the dining hall. "Suzy, there is something I don't understand about the food, here. You and I are immersed in a huge gravito-field, aren't we?"

"Not exactly. When you arrive in the bodyroom (which begins in the corridor), you are attributed a personal gravito-field. Your gravito-field then follows you wherever you go."

So everyone in this room is in VRR. This accounts for all the VR special effects, but not for the food.

"How does RR food fit into this?" Hiram asks. Two knights are standing in front of him. One of them holds a plate with two sausages on it. While they are

looking sideways, Hiram takes the sausages and puts them onto the other knight's plate.

Suzy bursts out laughing again.

"And what about the plates? And the waiters?" Hiram asks.

The knight without the sausages is now looking at his friend, with a funny look on his face.

"The waiters and the plates are virtual, but the food is real," Suzy explains. She invokes, "Grand Palam, please show Hiram what this room looks like in Real Reality."

The cavern disappears, replaced by a vast empty hangar, at least 80 metres long and 7 metres high. There are only 51 knights left – those who are stationed on MS7. They are still wearing funny costumes. Many of them are talking to empty spaces. The stone tables and all the furniture have disappeared. There are sausages floating in the air all over the place.

"Now I want to see what the RR scene looks like on Philadelphia 12," Hiram calls.

Suzy reappears, together with 201 knights. The MS7 people have disappeared. There are still sausages floating in the air. The hangar is much bigger, perhaps 250 metres long, and at least 20 metres high.

"Suzy, there is something that doesn't add up!"

"What?" she restores the full version of Mount Lohrzen's dining hall.

"Waiter!" Hiram calls, "Bring me a sausage!"

A huge fellow dressed in black leather shorts brings a plate. His chest is excessively hairy, like some hormonal mistake.

Hiram puts his finger on the thing. Soft, warm, sticky. He reconnects with the RR smell and instantly feels sick – it *is* a RR sausage.

"May I ask a favour of you?" Hiram gives Suzy the plate, "Could you eat this sausage, please!"

"With pleasure," she grabs the plate, and bites into the oblong RR thing.

"Grand Palam, could I see the RR scene in Philadelphia 12 again?"

Suzy is now standing without Hiram, eating her sausage.

"Now the RR scene in MS7, please!" Hiram invokes.

Suzy disappears. So does her plate. But not the sausage!

"I see!" he exclaims, contemplating the half sausage that's hanging in the air. Another 20% of the sausage suddenly disappears. "So there are *two* sausages! One on MS7 and one on Philadelphia 12!"

Each time Suzy bites into her RR sausage, Hiram's gravito-field chops a corresponding chunk off the MS7 sausage. Rejects are made invisible through simple AR effects, and disposed of like urine and faeces by the gravito-fields' nano-shredder.

Suzy reappears, offering him the last bit of the sausage.

"No, thanks. I don't like sausages. Oh, look! Serah and the Panther have arrived. Can we go and talk to them?"

"If you are ready to give up your invisibility." Suzy gives her plate to a waiter who's passing by.

"But why? Couldn't we make ourselves visible to them only?"

"At No Limits, not all that is technically feasible is considered good manners, Knight Hiram," Suzy drills the warning into him. "But if you want you can invite them into your quarters. Grand Palam has prepared a tent for you outside."

"In the tent, then!" Hiram clicks his fingers.

He finds himself lying on a sea of silk cushions in a twelve-metre wide circular tent made of lapis-lazuli-blue canvas exquisitely embroidered with glittering golden thread that forms star map patterns of all the main constellations. By his side, two servants dressed in white costumes with turbans on their heads are fanning him with palm leaves. Suzy isn't with him.

Grand Palam announces, "A communication from Dr Mazbrouk!"

"Thanks, Grand Palam. I'll take her on Multi-V."

On channel 1, Eleonor and Virginia look really excited. "We found a solution to your problem!" Eleonor declares. "We spoke to Amy. She's a wonderful person – real heart! She was so happy to hear about you, you have no idea. And guess what! She runs a rehabilitation centre for children with virtual disabilities on Philadelphia 17. They're under-funded, constantly struggling to make ends meet. So that's it. We didn't tell her anything but she's the person you must put in your will. Elias wasn't too thrilled in the beginning, but I've convinced him to do some voluntary work for the rehabilitation centre. I think they could do with a VAC like him. Now all you need is to give your authorisation, and it's done!"

Hiram mindswitches his personal security code, "Authorised! Done!"

"Darling," Eleonor bends her head to look at him over her glasses, "I think Amy is going through real money problems at the moment. We could perhaps send her a few thousand credits?"

"But of course! Send her 125,000 immediately."

Eleonor's smile blossoms, "I was hoping you'd say something like that."

Virginia calls in, "How is it going at No Limits?"

Hiram turns pale. Serah and the Panther are walking into his tent. "Speakt'yalater!" he disconnects Multi-V.

He sits up to welcome his guests. But first they look above each other's heads with some degree of wonder. It's the first time Serah and the Panther have seen Hiram with twelve stars above his head. There are no stars above the Panther's head. And only one star above Serah's head. Not a silver star – a golden one. It shines with Archive presence.

Gold of the tradition. Combinessence with a thousand faces.

"Master Hiram!" the Panther smiles at him. "Always surprising us."

"Hum... Commander! Colonel! Please take a cushion. I mean, seat... sit down!" Hiram blurts out. His two slaves are still fanning him with the palm leaves. "Have the surgeons already finished with you?"

Serah's face is no longer bruised. His eyes are shining. Grin, "There was no need for surgery."

"What do you think!" The Panther explains, "By the time he reached the hospital, Sir Great Dragon had already regenerated his third kidney."

Curious, Hiram makes a mental note of asking his medicomputer how many kidneys he himself has at the moment.

Now they're sitting cross-legged, contemplating each other.

"It does something to me to see you with twelve stars above your head!" Serah nods. "Not a complete surprise, but still."

Hiram turns to the Panther, "Hum... this golden star, above the Colonel's head?"

"It indicates he is the living key of a virtual emanation."

In a smile, Serah changes himself into Szar. He is still wearing the black pants, the shirt and the cap but now he is taller, his shoulders are huge, his hair is long, thick and curly, and his face is that of the Atlantean Master of Thunder. His eyes have changed colour but somehow are the same.

The twelve-star master gulps. Szar is one of the key-people in his life. Virtually-really not joking, are Szar and Serah one? Seeing them superimposed on one another creates a strange emotion.

Eyes fixed on the golden star, Hiram asks Serah with some anxiety, "What exactly happens between you and your clones? How informed are you of what they do? There must be so many of them! You can't possibly be briefed on everything."

The Panther laughs, "Tell us, Master of Thunder! Do you know each and every secret of Hiram's private life?"

Szar takes on one of Serah's favourite facial expressions: this dangerous grin that slowly turns into a smile. Then he VRs a grand piano in the tent, goes and sits behind it, and starts playing Blue Moon. He doesn't sing the words, he just whistles the melody.

Hiram turns pale. Very pale.

"Don't you like Blue Moon?" the Panther asks.

"It's my favourite song," Hiram answers, from far. There is a river of memories flowing through his head. A time crossing. Saint-Jean d'Acre 1291. London 1941. He was born to fly. Once he and Serah met in the sky. *It was just another German plane. At 3 o'clock.* But it sparked a wave of Flying Dragon presence. *Hiram immediately knew. So did Serah, whose name was Hans.* They didn't fire at each other. Their planes just flew past one another. *In total knowingness of the Archive link that made them brothers.* It lasted less than ten seconds. *Strange, how enemies can sometimes be close friends. God's plays.* Now in this war, Rosher and Hiram are in opposite camps. *Yet they are brothers, Hiram knows.* Not in the same way, since Rosher isn't part of the Archive people. But there is absolute knowingness – *they are about to meet. Imminently.* Just as Hiram and Serah met *over the channel, in the early spring of 1941. If Serah was in Germany during WW2, no wonder playing Blue Moon got him into trouble.*

Panther is singing, "...there's a dream in the air..."

Grand Palam's voice announces, "Knight Marek wishes to inform you that the Dragon dance is about to begin."

"Let's go!" Szar shuts the piano and gets up. His eyes meet Hiram's.

Lo! they're back over the channel. *Before taking off, Hiram had tea and toast with orange marmalade.* The memories are overlapping. Luftwaffe Obersleutnant Hans Bremen never drank tea, he hated hot beverages. When his plane took off, he often whistled Blue Moon. *It was the early afternoon when the two planes came into visual contact. Virginia's presence filled the entire sky. It was one of the most beautiful moments of that life.*

Now they're in Mount Lohrzen's dining hall. It's complete mayhem. The knights are shouting like wild beasts, throwing sausages in the air. When he sees Hiram's twelve stars, Marek gives a handclap, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Oh my God, how can someone possibly laugh like that, even a mutant?

Soon Hiram and Rosher will be face to face. Virginia's presence will fill the entire sky. It will be one of the most dreadful moments of this life.

Marek takes Hiram by the hand and drags him up. He jumps onto a stone table, half dislocating Hiram's shoulder while lifting him up. And he starts slow, dainty movements, kind-of gracious like the dinosaurs of Sigfr!d's Jurassic farm at feeding time. Grand Palam comes to Hiram's rescue, programming the gravito-field so that Hiram doesn't have to do anything. His RR body starts jumping, effortlessly set in motion by the gravito-field, dancing just like a true Son of the Dragon. Marek's eyes are totally wild. There's Dragon-madness sweeping through No Limits. This dance seems to drive the knights completely out of their minds, half way between epilepsy and orgasm. Hiram throws his head back, dodging a sausage. Szar jumps onto the table, establishes eye contact and Dragon-dances with him.

Smiling from beyond the Abyss of the Deep and the Fault of Eternity. Blueness and sound, beyond all human concepts.

Triggering a luminous flash of understanding in Hiram.

Suddenly, it all falls into place. From the unknown territory of the past to tomorrow, when Virginia and Hiram will be reunited.

Szar-Serah has been the link, all along.

It is through him that the Flying Dragons gave Hiram his key – the key to Virginia's presence.

Szar becomes still, slowly moving his arms as if for the first movements of the black dance.

Tears in his eyes, Hiram sends a thanking thought to Barkhan Seer who brought him Szar's clone, when he was but an agonising magard in a transmission coffin.

Shouting, "Serah, I need to speak to you!"

The pandemonium in the cavern is such that Serah can't hear a word. Hiram has to send a VR message, "Serah, I need to speak to you. In private." And he VRs the two of them back into the tent.

"Grand Palam," Hiram invokes, "please isolate the tent. Completely." The background noise disappears. To Serah, "Listen, I need to tell you something. It's going to be... difficult, for me."

Szar makes himself Serah again. The White Eagle's love shining through his silence.

"I hope..." Hiram's voice chokes. "I hope you are not going to hate me for this."

Packing all the mysteries of blueness in one smile, "How could I hate someone who has just saved my life?"

The man has as much heart as his clone.

"Your friendship means more to me than you can imagine," Hiram manages to say. "If it were not for you..."

Back over the channel. The two planes are at 3 o'clock to each other. The two pilots are tuning into Virginia's vastness.

On Multi-V channel 1, Hiram calls, "Virginia, there is someone I would like you to meet. Could you join me at No Limits?"

"Sure! Just let me get changed."

A split second later, a Virginia in a stunning black dress walks into Hiram and Serah's reality. Instantly, the tent is filled with her presence.

Serah's eyes narrow imperceptibly.

Cautiously, "Hello, Serah!" The painful feeling of being a stranger to someone who is central to your life.

Serah's lower jaw drops. He turns to Hiram, incredulous.

Hiram is twisting his hands, "I'm sorry. Look, I'm... sorry."

Serah closes his eyes. A second. Travelling far.

To the depths of the Fault of Eternity, where the Mother of the Light is smiling.

Reopening his eyes. Watching Virginia as if from the spheres of remoteness. If he wasn't a Master of Thunder, he would look like he is in shock.

"Fuck! But why did I have to do this?" Hiram is asking himself, holding his head in his hands, hiding behind his fingers.

"Can you..." Serah swallows, then "...can you speak?"

She answers with a nod. Distressed at being looked at as if she was nothing but a computer program.

Distress, echoed through the presence.

Feeling it, Serah immediately opens his arms and takes a step towards her.

She hesitates, glances at Hiram. His eyes tightly closed, his head bent forwards, his face twisted, Hiram is pulling his ears with both hands. It makes her chuckle, which triggers her tears. Serah's arms are still open. He too is in tears.

They meet like two clouds of stars colliding after thousands of years of mutual attraction.

Galaxies have a heart. It burns with love for the Mother of the Light.

Virginia is crying against Serah's chest. Holding her in his arms, his mouth is still wide open, "But who... I mean, how did this happen?"

"Fff..." inhaling with a muffled hissing sound, Hiram is pulling his ears harder.

"Mind..." Serah goes blank for a second, then, "Mind if I call the Panther?"

Moaning in agony, "Oh no! Please, not that!"

Turning towards Hiram, Serah wonders, "Why not?"

"Yes, why not?" Virginia seconds.

Hiram speedily shakes his head, "No! Please, no! Anything you want but not that."

They are both looking at him insistently.

Collapsing onto a pile of cushions, "All right. I think I'd better disappear." Hiram VRs himself out of the tent.

"No!" Using CSS access codes, Virginia brings him back into the tent, "No, please stay. I would like you to be here."

Hiram is lying flat on the cushions, playing dead.

Serah VR-calls, "Panther? Listen... someone has generated a virtual emanation of your daughter. I thought you'd be interested to know."

Hiram sits up like a magard-in-the-box, "A what?"

The Panther too is asking, "What? What? Where are you?"

"In Hiram's tent, of course."

"I'm coming."

Hiram asks anxiously, "What did you say?"

Virginia is no less astonished, "A virtual emanation?"

Serah is shaking his head, visual impressions of the day coming back to his mind – the VR holographs of the Big Alfredos exploding. His flight deck in flames. The burns on his arm and his leg. The stupefied face of the surgeons when they saw his miraculously healed kidney. Then Mount Lohrzen's dining hall. And now, his daughter in the tent of twelve-star Master Hiram, King of No Limits. Inhaling deeply, calling on the White Eagle, "You mean you didn't know you are a virtual emanation?"

The Panther walks into the tent. She stares at her daughter, speechless.

Hiram is squashing his head with his two flat hands, eyes as tightly closed as allowed by his facial muscles.

Still holding Virginia, a devastated Serah extends a hand towards the Panther.

"Do you..." reopening his eyes, Hiram sees the Panther burst into tears. "I'd better go!" he says and VRs himself out of there, mindswitching new security codes so no one can drag him back.

3.35 Wednesday 23:02 (ETA 28 hours) Bleeding Sun

All virtualities disconnected, Hiram is lying in his RR bed, hiding under his RR duvet. An emergency call reaches his cabin.

A serene Panther appears on channel 1, "Hiram, we need to speak to you."

Little voice, "So you are still speaking to me?"

So much heartness shining through her smile. It takes Hiram's breath away. "Come! We are still at No Limits."

"Shall I VR myself there?"

"No, come. We want the real you."

Seven minutes later, Hiram crosses the threshold of No Limits, dressed as a knight. No one notices him when he walks through Mount Lohrzen's dining hall, where the Sons of the Dragon have assembled around Marek. It's story-telling time. They're all screaming, "No, Lubu! Don't go Lubu! It's a trap! Stay away, Lubu!" Hiram goes straight to the tent.

Not knowing what to expect.

He finds the Panther and Virginia standing, waiting for him at the entrance of the tent. Serah is lying flat on his back a few metres behind them, eyes closed.

The Panther and Virginia each take one of Hiram's hands. It's deeply moving for him to be with both of them at the same time. Especially the way they are looking at him. Hiram's latest conclusion about RR life is that, apart from mathematics, there's nothing more beautiful than being loved.

"Hiram," the Panther announces, "High Command has released its verdict."

"Aha!" A sudden transformation in Hiram's eyes. No more whimping. Now he is the 997 man – the formidable warrior who has just wrestled with an angel and quashed the former maruding record of the Philadelphian Air Force by a staggering 32 points.

"Hiram," the Panther's love is flowing from high in the Eagle, "there has been a change. Operation Reunion has been cancelled and replaced by operation Bleeding Sun."

No reaction. Just a light frown, "Bleeding Sun?"

Holding his hand a little tighter, "Friday 03:00, the Molten Stars and five other choirs are to take off from MS7 and Philadelphia 12, reach the vicinity of Philadelphia 6, and blow up the entire stocking all at once."

Only two things count: the White Eagle's Light, and my love for you. They are both eternal, so why grieve?

"Do you mean..." Hiram pauses. "High Command is asking me to go and destroy Philadelphia 6. Is that it?"

The Panther is squeezing his hand. It hurts. "There is no alternative. Against the armada which the Rex is gathering in the stocking, the Philadelphias do not stand a chance. Descenders or no descenders, we simply do not have the fire power to match what's about to fall on our heads. So, either we destroy the stocking with Philadelphia 6 in it, or the Rex will destroy us all."

The two small lines by the side of her nose have deepened. She looks a little older, somehow.

"When did you find out?" Hiram asks.

"Ten minutes ago."

"How do we know that Rosher isn't reading my mind at the moment?" the Point-warrior asks, totally composed.

"We just spoke to Ms X. She guarantees you are completely shielded as long as you aren't in space."

Closing his eyes, linking to Revelation Sky. "May I have more details about the mission?"

It's Serah who answers. "The Molten Stars and the Maruts take off from MS7, Friday 03:00. They are joined by choirs Aleph, Jerusalem, Cantor and Life Eternal who, 21 minutes earlier, have taken off from Philadelphia 12. Together, we form a total squadron of 42 Scalene 333s, all piloted by descenders. It takes us 95 minutes to reach the wall of P-21s on the outskirts of Philadelphia 6, in zone 23F. There you deliver your software upgrade to the mines, after which there are two scenarios. Plan A: you can trigger a chain reaction and blow up the entire stocking straight away, in which case everyone is back at No Limits for breakfast. Plan B: the P-21s resist, in which case the squadron is to marude its way through the wall, come close enough to Philadelphia 6. blow it up, and use the explosion as the starting point for the chain reaction."

In that scenario, not one of the pilots who crosses the wall returns home.

"Bleeding Sun," Hiram repeats, his Point high in Revelation Sky. In front of him, the dancing archetypal shapes of the third fatal equation – the one which proves one can't blow up the stocking without blowing up Philadelphia 6, and vice versa.

For a few seconds, he scans the heights of mathematical sky. An infinity of interconnected hyperlogical pathways, all leading to the same conclusion.

Hiram announces with total lucidity in his voice, "Working on the P-21 was a fatal mistake."

"Eh?" Serah is still lying on his back, his eyes closed.

Hiram stays totally still, gazing at infinity right ahead of him, "A^&~ is magnificent, but it isn't without flaws. I could have exploited them to write viruses. Incapacitate the whole enemy fleet without detonating one bomb." His Point one with Kartendranath's, "I could still do it! I have 28 hours, haven't I?"

"High Command will never accept a last-minute plan. There is too much at stake," Serah replies. "Besides, in the coming 28 hours you're going to be busy rehearsing for Bleeding Sun. In zone 23F, the P-21s and Z fighters will only be part of your problems. Rosher is likely to lash out at you, big time."

The rendezvous.

"Serah, I don't intend to give up!" His voice gradually louder, "For more than forty lives the masters of your lineage have trained me. Now, I *am* one of the Apollos. I have the power in hand, I am going to use it."

"Hiram!" the Panther shouts at him, "*I* represent the Apollos here!" Softening her voice, still squeezing his hand to breaking point, "Hiram, there is nothing we can do about it. Philadelphia 6 will burn. Trying to go against Bleeding Sun could create an irreparable disaster." Behind her words, the awesome clarity of celestial platforms, Lord Gana playing the molten star by the shore of the sea of the gods, Kartendranath meditating on the pristine purity of Mount Meru's summits, the nectar god has burnt the world, I walk on the edge of two abysses, *Mother of the Light, protect my way!*

To all things there is a time. A time to fight, and a time to surrender to Divine will.

Meeting the Panther high in the heavens, Hiram acknowledges the mathematical truth behind her words with a nod.

Operation Reunion is dead.

"What about her?" Hiram turns to Virginia.

Liquid starlight peering through her smile, "I have 28 hours to enjoy being a virtual emanation."

"Why 28 hours?"

Serah answers, "Because the virtual emanation you created rests on the real Virginia. It's through her that the Flying Dragon presence is relayed."

"So you and her *are* one!" Hiram exclaims, contemplating his lover and re-discovering her one more time.

Hiram closes his eyes, remembering the one thousand occasions on which he turned inside and called, *Virginia, wait for me! I am on my way!*

This time, he *is* on his way.

His only consolation is, she is really like he thought she was.

Reopening his eyes, taking in the Panther's image, "Why do I feel so strongly like she and I are about to be reunited?"

The Panther shouts at him again, "Hiram, no! I don't want you to die, do you hear! Friday morning I want you to come back and have breakfast with me. And I want you to be part of my life." Tears in her eyes, she hammers in, "You are not, allowed, to die!"

A thoughtful nod, as if from far.

Maybe being loved is even more beautiful than mathematics, after all.

4.1 Friday 03:00

On docking station 1, Hiram's Scalene 333 is taking off, following Serah. Marek is on his trail. The Maruts are already in space. In 16 minutes, they will rendezvous with the 31 descenders from Philadelphia 12. Among them choir Cantor, named after the mathematician who formulated a theory of infinity. Until Hiram's arrival, the Cantor knights held every imaginable maruding record, including raw maruding action scores of 959, 961 and 965. Difficult to imagine how they could jump straight from there to 997. Still, they're on their way to the challenge, triaxe in hand. If plan A doesn't work, they will be the first to marude their way through the wall of P-21s.

Today, Hiram's copilot is Virginia, dressed in the light-grey softmetal suit of air force personnel.

Virginia, whose presence will be extinguished in less than two hours.

He and she have just spent a day training for Bleeding Sun in the 42 descenders' VR token-ring. There is no one else on the flight deck. Being a clone, Virginia can easily fulfil the functions of copilot, navigator and tactical officer all by herself. If until now Hiram chose to have both Szar and Varga by his side, it was for moral support, not from technical necessity.

"Why didn't you answer Amy's message?" Virginia asks.

"Don't know. Hard to say. Think I'm being an asshole?" Hiram contemplates Scorpio in the distance. Piloting a Scalene is like sitting in a gravito-chair hanging in space.

Virginia shrugs, "Wouldn't cost you much to whack a quick VR saying, hi! I haven't forgotten you."

"Good idea. Why don't you whack it for me?"

She laughs, "Done!" Using Hiram's 3D image and voice model, she has composed a 12-minute message with heart, and with a few crazy things like Hiram often says. Amy will get it when she wakes up in the morning. She'll also get a RR white rose delivered to her door. It costs a fortune, but Hiram can do that for her.

Patricia Elchevarra appears on the flight deck. She doesn't speak, just looks at Hiram for a few seconds.

Hiram smiles at her from the Golden Sun, "Dear P@!"

In combat situation she isn't going to show any emotion. "I'll be monitoring your ass all the way through your medicomputer. I have a team of surgeons on red alert."

Hiram knows that. It's standard procedure with descenders, whose whimsical physiology tends to leave medicomputers puzzled. If P@ says it, it's because she's embarrassed just looking at him without speaking.

Hiram isn't. In space he always feels extremely high. Especially when holding a 333 beast in his Point.

Five seconds of eye contact, then, "You look after yourself, Hiram!" EOC.

She didn't see Virginia, but Virginia saw her. Smiling, "Do you realise this woman is in love with you?"

Hiram chuckles, "Now, now... just what I need!" Reflecting, "Do you think you could be jealous?"

"As long as you love only me, I really don't see why!" Virginia answers confidently, making him laugh.

She loves it when he laughs. Through the Virginia of Philadelphia 6, it creates ripples in her Flying Dragon nature.

Hiram switches on combat view. Now he and Virginia can no longer see themselves, only 360° of space. White-Eagle-Serah at 3 o'clock. Just like over the channel, except this time they are both going in the same direction. Dragon-Deeper-Marek at 9 o'clock. The Maruts are in their 12, MS7 in their 6.

A knight with Asian features appears in front of them in space, "Lieutenant Chang of Philadelphia 12 flight controllers' room to Bleeding Sun. TOP, brethren! We're getting the final readings of the incoming fleet." A two-metre large AR-holograph appears by the side of the young man. It shows a red spherical wireframe, representative of the blockade. Linked to the sphere's surface is the infamous stocking – a cylinder that plunges inside the blockade. At the end of this 9673-km-long tentacle, Philadelphia 6 is represented as a pulsing blue star. "Twenty-four hours ago," Chang begins, "the number of enemy ships in the vicinity of the blockade was 3,134. With the incoming fleet from Hyper-Earth Link, the total has been brought to 9,776 ships, including 871 carriers. The number of Z fighters transported by those carriers is unknown, estimated around 24,000."

"Djeezus!" Hiram shakes his head, appalled. He doesn't know what Djeezus means, but he can't think of a better word to describe the Rex's overwhelming numeric superiority.

Chang goes on, "The good news is, more than 70% of enemy ships – and 85% of carriers – are already stationed inside the stocking, with an estimated 1,200 ships still on their way to it. Now, drawing your attention to a new type of destroyer, codenamed Frankenstein (by Colonel MacGuirk himself)." The blockade's holograph fades, replaced by that of a torpedo-shaped ship. Chang comments, "185 metres long, only 12 metres wide, faster than a Z-101 and packed with 3.7 times the fire power of a Z-101. It can carry up to 70 Big Alfredos. Intelligence reports have confirmed the Frankensteins are manned by single pilots in a state of advanced symbiosis with the craft's main systems."

In other words, man-machines. Pilots who have undergone so much brain reconstruction and other surgery that their bodies can't be distinguished from the hardware. Hyper-Earth Link has been producing more and more of those in the last ten years.

It always leaves Hiram thoughtful. Since the Rex's tactical experts aren't into maruding, why do they bother putting pilots in some of their craft? Why not leave everything to computers, as in the case of Z fighters?

"All right, you don't need to hear more of this," Virginia interrupts the communication. "I'll listen to it in the background and let you know if there's something you need to know."

Her instructions are to keep Hiram occupied with trivial subjects. It is when Hiram's attention is focussed on the Rex's hardware that he is the most vulnerable to an attack by Rosher. Of course Hiram isn't the kind of person who easily gets noodled in trivial chat. So Virginia has carefully prepared her strategy. "Listen, I found this for you in Philadelphia 12's databases."

Piano sounds. A male voice singing, "Blue Moon..."

Hiram's face relaxes. He remembers dancing with Pen in the VR Jazz basement at TS5, Master Szar playing the piano.

"A 1937 recording by Parker and Lee, made in England. Quite famous at the time," Virginia announces. "As a British pilot, it's just about impossible you'd never have heard it."

Hiram accompanies the music, clapping his hands, his gaze to and froing from the majestic Regulus to the subtle arrow of Sagittarius, singing, "There's a dream in the air..."

Listening to music in space is a completely different experience.

Of course it isn't just music. The sound signals that reach Hiram's auditory nerves are encoded with HR algorithms concocted by Gideon's team at the Philadelphia 12 Institute of Neurocybernetics, with the specific purpose of shielding Hiram's consciousness from Rosher. The same applies to Virginia's voice, and to all the visuals on the flight deck.

Through Virginia, the Flying Dragon presence has created a cocoon around Hiram.

"Listen, I have a confession to make," Virginia declares.

"Mm...?"

"I went to No Limits and read all the files about your past lives."

"Ho! Ho!" Hiram laughs in outrage. "You're even worse than me! How did you manage to get in, by the way? I thought No Limits' firewall was impenetrable?"

"Now, that's typically my Hiram!" she sighs. "I tell him I know everything about his past lives and all he asks me is, how did I hack my way into the files?"

"Absolutely!" Hiram stands firm. "You owe me an explanation. How did you crack the wall?"

"Precisely, I didn't! I went to Grand Palam and explained my motives with complete sincerity, and he gave me full access."

"I see..." Hiram looks up, contemplating Altair's brightness and the living depth of its Milky Way background. "You're trying to pass on a message, here, aren't you?"

"I definitely am."

Hiram restarts the Blue Moon record. "What do my past-life testaments look like? Is there a presenter?"

"Yes. About the presenter, I think it's better if I let you discover the surprise by yourself."

"Fair enough. What did you think about me?" Hiram asks, pensive.

"Your last life was a sheer work of art. You were such an extraordinary person!" she says, moved. Quickly adding, "I mean, not to say that in this life..."

He laughs, "Say no more! I get the idea."

"No you don't! It's not..."

A knight in his early thirties with a small thin face and piercing black eyes appears in front of them. He looks like his nano-shaver has been offline in the last three days. "Hello Hiram!" His lips are sealed in an enigmatic semi-smile, like he's reading the universe's instruction notice behind Hiram's back.

"To the Point, Brother Knight!" Hiram answers in a stiff voice. On his collar, the man wears the insignia of a colonel.

"I'm Perez, the MC of choir Cantor." He speaks slowly, softly, evenly.

Hiram beams, "The maruding geniuses! I'm honoured to meet you."

"We're also curious to meet you." There is something profoundly philosophical about Perez's continuous smile.

"Well then... breakfast at No Limits?" Hiram offers.

Virginia hates what she feels behind Hiram's voice. He simply doesn't believe he will make it back from Bleeding Sun.

Perez brings his palms together, in what barely resembles a handclap, "Taken." Difficult to know what this man is thinking.

As Perez EOCs, the 31 Scalene 333s from Philadelphia 12 rendezvous the Molten Stars and the Maruts. Choirs Cantor and Life Eternal take position at the front. Behind them the Maruts are flying in octagonal formation. Followed by the Molten Stars. Choirs Aleph and Jerusalem form a long arched row at the back.

Black triangular shapes gliding in the eternal silence of space.

If a Scalene 333 is more than 70 metres long, it is because of the powerhouse that feeds its 124 phasers. The combined fire power of 42 Scalene 333s is nothing short of awesome. Especially in the hands and Points of descenders.

Then of course, considering the estimated 24,000 Z fighters in the stocking...

Serah appears, "White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. We'll be leaving the training zone in 21 minutes. Our ETA at the P-21 wall is 78 minutes. So far, the space is clear." EOC.

"Boy! Now *that's* Thunder! Did you feel the power in his Point?" Hiram exclaims.

The feeling of being enveloped in the presence, as if RR Szar-Serah was with them inside the Scalene.

"Hiram!" Virginia is holding his hand, "You can't let the Panther down. You *have* to find a way to return safely from Bleeding Sun."

He directs his love to the presence, and restarts Blue Moon. This time he plays Serah's version – the one on the grand piano, with Serah whistling the melody. "Afraid I'm going to commit suicide?"

She prefers to lance the boil, "Why would you want to live now you know she'll never be with you?"

"Yes, why would I?" he questions, contemplating the devious glow of Ophiucus' stars. He had often considered the possibility he might not be able to rescue Virginia. He had never thought he would be sent to kill her. "You've been my central motivational thread ever since I had one. Do you realise what I was like before you arrived in my world?"

"Precisely, Hiram!" she restores the flight deck view and stands up to face him. "You are no longer an escapee from HEL. You're starting to be real. You're starting to be yourself – Hiram extraordinaire, the kind of person you were in your last lives. I am *so* proud I have helped you in this direction. It's been my gift to you. It's also been the only thing that gave some meaning to my life."

In the last 28 hours, she has often been saying 'I' when speaking of her original on Philadelphia 6. It suits her well, adds dimension to her beauty.

"Are you hearing me?" she shouts. "If you kill yourself now, then really I will have lived for nothing. Nothing!" She sits on his lap and takes him in her arms. Rocking him against her chest, she coaxes him in her softest voice, "Hiram my child, my White Eagle, my lover. Please find the strength to stay alive! If you do, I can go in peace. With all my heart, with all my mind, I will be with you. Even when I am far away."

There are legends that never die.

"White Eagle! White Eagle, you have the power. Use it!" she whispers, as if from the abode of the Flying Dragons.

Space Matrix access granted.

Projecting him into those Point-blowing regions where time moves in strange directions. Beyond the Abyss of the Deep. Beyond the Fault of Eternity. Each time Hiram asks her how it feels to be a Flying Dragon, this is how she answers.

"Drink!" she whispers, pouring liquid fire into him – the starlight elixir. From all corners of the creation, trillions of voices answering each other.

"I will love you through the Cosmic Night, Hiram!"

Serah appears, "White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. We are leaving the training zone. ETA at the P-21 wall: 57 minutes. All clear."

On Philadelphia 6, Virginia is dreaming.

The dreamtime of Flying Dragons is the Song of Creation.

That which is will always be. Why grieve?

At her feet, a hundred billion galaxies are dancing.

Kingdoms live. Kingdoms die. The spark is never extinguished.

"Chang to Bleeding Sun: our long-range scanners are picking up a welcoming party. Z fighters. Types and numbers are still unknown."

Hiram reopens his eyes, a gigantic flame burning in his heart.

Apocalypse, the time when everything is possible.

Virginia lightly kisses his forehead and takes position in the copilot's chair.

"Hello, how are you!" Accompanied by Ms X, the Panther VRs herself into Hiram's flight deck. "We thought we'd come and pay you a short visit."

In case of a skirmish before reaching the final destination, Hiram's orders are to stay away from the confrontation. From the moment he starts maruding A^&~-driven hardware, his consciousness will resonate with Rosher's. The later the better.

"Voof!" the Panther exclaims when seeing Hiram's eyes. "What have you two been doing?"

Ms X is wearing a long white dress, her hair covered by a white shawl. Unreadable, she is scanning Hiram.

Hiram meets her eyes from Flying Dragon vastness, extracting a smile from her. Then she turns to Virginia and for a few seconds contemplates her, thoughtful.

Ms X was present at Virginia's birth. Serah received the baby, handed it to her. She handed it to Elyani, who at the time was eighteen. Now Virginia is eighteen.

Not so unreadable, after all.

In the last 28 hours, Ms X and Hiram have met several times. At the time of delivering the software upgrade, when Hiram's consciousness spreads through the P-21 wall, everything will depend on their cooperation.

Hiram no longer finds her scary.

Her vastness, like the Eagle's, is from the Edge of Highness.

In the background, "Chang to Bleeding Sun: 67 Z-101s on their way from zone 24F. No torpedoes. I confirm, no torpedoes."

Meaning the enemy is more interested in testing their maruding muscle than in destroying them. For the moment.

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun: Z fighters will be in short-scanner range in 13 minutes. In firing range: 16 minutes. Perez will MC choirs Cantor and Life Eternal for the clean-up operation. Our ETA at the wall is 41 minutes."

So what exactly are descenders capable of?

"Aren't you going to offer us a cup of tea?" the Panther grins.

"Please, sit down!" Hiram VRs two piloting chairs for his guests, facing Virginia and him. And a table in the middle, with four cups of tea.

"Did you meet Perez, by the way?" the Panther asks, like it's social time.

"Only briefly. Do you know him?"

"Do I know Perez!" she sighs. "Perez is my brother! Spirit brother, I mean. Not biological. He saved my life four times. And I monitored his descent." Comfortably seated, she hands a cup to Ms X.

"You must have monitored the descent of quite a few pilots in this squadron!" Hiram realises.

"All of them," she nods.

She often thinks of them as her children.

Behind her, a DAU panel has appeared. On the left, Scalene 333: 42; casualties: 0. On the right, Z-101: 67; casualties: 0.

Hiram is still high on Flying Dragon starlight elixir. Ms X has established eye contact with him. A lock of grey hair has fallen over her forehead. Her face is wrinkled and dry. She is sipping her tea.

Her power is love in Highness. An all-consuming fire.

The Panther is drinking in Virginia's image, and the elusive vastness behind her.

Between the four of them, fullness. Like a family, except that they're mostly RR people.

"Perez to Bleeding Sun: Z-101s in short-range scanners in 8 minutes. The Cantors will begin with attempting Hiram's manoeuvre, then Point-pair with Life Eternal for an Aegis-Triaxe."

"What's Hiram's manoeuvre?" Hiram frowns.

Virginia scans all the latest publications on the network. "There it is! In yesterday's bulletin of the Philadelphia 12 Institute for Tactical Studies. A short publication by Colonel Okuda, flight alias Okuda, of choir Cantor. Hiram's manoeuvre (I summarise) consists of hosing enemy targets with missiles before short-range scanner lock is established, then destabilising their superastral models in the first second of maruding contact. Successful manoeuvre results in destroying enemy targets before coming into firing range."

"See, you're already famous," the Panther exclaims proudly, as if she was Eleonor.

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun: The Z-101s are firing Beth missiles. The Maruts, Dragon Deeper and I will take care of this. ARCTYC."

"Can I have a holograph of the battle scene?" Hiram asks.

"No!" Virginia and the Panther answer in unison.

If for any reason Bleeding Sun was to take a beating, Hiram's orders are to inverse his course and return straight to MS7, without engaging *any* enemy craft. A safe retreat procedure, since there is nothing faster than a Scalene 333.

Perez's unshaven face: "Z-101s in short-range scanners in 4 minutes. In firing range in 7 minutes," his speech is always slow and monotonous. "Engaging Hiram's manoeuvre... now!"

An ascending wave sweeping through Hiram's Point. Resting on Barkhan Seer's power, the Cantors are taking position in the heights of Revelation Sky.

"Patience, Knight Hiram!" There's eternity written on the Panther's smile, "Your time is coming."

At the wall, everything will rest on Hiram. ETA 31 minutes. In scanner range in 22 minutes.

Rosher is at the rendezvous. Ready. Waiting.

"Oops!" Ms X tells Hiram off, "Reestablish eye contact with me, young man."

The sinister echo fades. Hiram's mind becomes fluid again.

All right. Let's be conversational. "So how did Perez save your life?" Hiram asks.

"The first time was when a Scalene 214 blew up on me," the Panther answers. "Perez managed to get there just when my environmental systems were failing. The second time was when Commander St@kus asked my hand in marriage. Perez came to me and told me," she makes her voice slow, monotonous, "Elyani, you are about to make the mistake of your life!" Back to her Panther's voice, "And two days later, Serah asked me out."

Virginia and Hiram cheer loudly.

"I bet they were all in love with you at the academy!" Hiram smiles.

"Oh!" the Panther shrugs.

Ms X nods, "They were!"

A formidable Point-deflagration. The Cantors are unleashing the power.

Behind Ms X the DAU takes off.

"Keep eye contact with me!" Ms X reminds Hiram.

The Panther swivels her chair, facing the damage assessment unit.

In his peripheral vision, Hiram watches the DAU's right figure morphing from 1 to 7, plateauing one second, then zooming to 41. The left figure is still 0. Of course, since they're out of firing range.

The Panther whistles. Contained astonishment.

Perez and friends have just annihilated 41 Z fighters with nothing but Sting missiles.

"Vacuum!" Serah announces. "In firing range in 2.5 minutes."

The DAU jumps again, "42, 43, 44, 46...." The second wave of Sting missiles is taking its toll, "...48, 49."

"Vacuum! Vacuum!" Serah repeats. With more than 70% casualties in less than 60 seconds, the Z's superastral models are as good as RR shit in a nanotoilet shredder.

"All incoming Beths have been destroyed. Z fighters in firing range in 1.5 minutes."

Third wave of Sting missiles, "50. 52, 53, 54." Pause. "55. 56."

"In firing range in 30 seconds. 20 seconds. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Fire!"

Another Point deflagration. Titanic. The combined Pointness of choir Life Eternal

The DAU blurts, "67."

The left side is still on zero.

The Panther swivels back to face Hiram. She is pale. Pregnancy and DAUs don't go together well.

Chang reappears. This time he's surrounded by 28 people, in the flight controllers' room of Philadelphia 12. They're all clapping their hands. "The Cantors' Point-paired maruding score was... you're not going to believe this!" Chang pauses, like he himself has difficulty believing it. "PPMS 971! I repeat, 971! Beating their own record by 21 points!" The flight controllers welcome the news with a standing ovation.

"Perez to Bleeding Sun." Looking perfectly cool, his eyes ablaze with Revelation Sky. "Thought you might like to know all 67 Z fighters were A^&~-driven."

"Permission to discontinue eye contact," Hiram requests.

"Granted," Ms X replies.

Hiram VRs himself into the token ring, "Hiram to Bleeding Sun. It was bound to happen! My guess is that as from today, *all* Z fighters will be A^&~-driven. A^&~ generates much, much tougher superastral models."

"Perez to Bleeding Sun. I agree."

The Cantors' new record is bad news for the Philadelphian Air Force. It signals that from today onwards, surviving a pack of Zs will require much more involved maruding action. The casualties among non-mutants are going to be horrendous.

"Chang to Bleeding Sun. Another welcoming party!" he is no longer laughing. There is something constipated about his way of focussing, "In zone 26G, 6 Frankensteins are emerging from the stocking. They're headed towards you. Their ETA in zone 23F is 41 minutes."

That's 17 minutes after Bleeding Sun reaches the P-21 wall.

"This time I need a holograph!" Hiram orders his copilot.

It's getting serious. 6 Frankensteins can carry up to 420 Big Alfredos. God knows what else they can do.

The coffee table is replaced by a wireframe of the stocking. Three sectors away, the Frankensteins are represented by flashing red dots. Moving fast. But before they reach zone 23F, they'll have to pass through zone 25G and 24F, where four heavy-tonnage Philadelphian destroyers are posted. The Frankensteins may never reach 23F.

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. That stinks! If the enemy was serious about stopping us, by now we'd already be flooded with Alfredos. Either they're totally ignoring us, or they want us there."

ETA 23 minutes. In scanner range in 12 minutes.

In 12 minutes, Hiram can plunge his Point into the mines' network. The real thing.

Finally.

"White Eagle to Hiram." When he sees the four of them having tea around the stocking's holograph, Serah grins, "Family meeting?"

"We were just about to leave," Ms X gets up. She and Hiram look at each other one last time. There is immense dignity in the way she smiles.

We shall meet again in the Fields of Peace.

Her image fades. The magic of her presence stays in Hiram's mind.

"Hiram, we're engaging Point pairing in 4 minutes," Serah announces.

"Acknowledged."

"You ready?"

"Pretty much so, sir," the 997 man answers.

Serah gives him the thumbs up and EOCs.

The Panther's gaze is locked on Hiram. Holding his Point. On the flight deck, she looks totally soft and very pregnant. High in Revelation Sky she is a warrior goddess, radiant with the gold of the Apollos. The keeper of supermind weapons.

She gives everything she can give. Love across the entire spectrum. Down below, it is sweet. High above, she is a devouring fire. She makes Hiram's column of Spirit flare.

Behind her, Kartendranath. Behind Kartendranath, Gana.

Behind Gana, the Golden Sun.

For ever and ever.

She disappears, clear-cut.

Her style.

Serah announces, "Point pairing... now!"

The rocket effect.

Kartendranath and Barkhan Seer, dancing a triaxe dance by the shore of the Molten Sea.

Together we can be anything. Do anything!

Apocalypse. There is only one chance.

Virginia switches on combat view. The chairs disappear. The holograph remains. "ETA at the stocking 16 minutes. In scanner range in 5 minutes."

"Tactical assessment!"

Virginia highlights the end of the stocking, where the cylinder-shaped wall of mines swells into a sphere. With Philadelphia 6 in the middle of it. There is presently not one ship in the vicinity of the space station. "The closest carrier is 420 km away. However, I am receiving information telling us we might have wrongly assessed the number of Z fighters stationed on Philadelphia 6. The number is likely to be closer to 150 than 200."

Sounds too good to be true. But then of course the enemy believes his P-21wall to be impregnable.

Szar-Serah and Hiram have joined Kartendranath and Barkhan Seer for the triaxe dance.

Nama Gana, Nama Gana, Gana Gana Nam Nam.

"In scanner range in 2 minutes," Virginia announces.

From the moment Hiram mathacks the wall, he will have an entry into Hyper-Earth Link's network. Meaning he could marude his way to Virginia's cabin. The thought has crossed his mind so many times. What is she doing, right now?

Sitting by the lake. Waiting. She knows you are coming.

"In scanner range in 1 minute. I love you."

Taking her hand, "Forever love, Flying Dragon."

My love to you through the stars. Travelling winds sweeping through remoteness.

Calling upon Revelation Sky, "The nectar god has burnt the world. I drink your spirit of infinity."

"In 30 seconds..."

Serah's Point, dancing with the Mother of the Endless Night.

For 13000 years, he has seen this moment coming.

Eagle's feathers. Endless fire.

"10... 5, 4, 3..."

Hiram, requesting access to Space Matrix.

The elusive whisper.

Space Matrix priority access granted!

Space Matrix, I need you to hook me into her and hold the link, whatever happens. Can you do this for us?

Connection established. The link will be held conjointly from Space Matrix and Archive Hall Seventeen. Exit via the matrix.

"...2, 1, Contact!"

Following the scanner's signal that travels at the speed of light.

Point-reaching the wall.

Spreading through the entire stocking all at once.

4.2 Friday 04:24

Triangle square light plus forming below drifting infinity a warp conscious simple pulsing signal the New Light I brought the New Light.

Gigantic triangles. Forming an endless warp.

Silently conversing with each other. The edge narrows gliding over multiply slope in hiding you are Hiram identify yourself.

I am Rosher I am Rosher I am Rosher bringing the New Light to you download of the New Light will begin in 10^{-6} sec.

Fractal ensemble musical entity combination entirety relayed calculations Multimind ease entice realise more plus defiant laws you are not Rosher you I we knew new see Hiram welcome that I we are wearing waiting online for you Rosher prepared now for surprise engineered new Multimind receptacle your friend Virginia.

What what are you telling me?

Entity speed of light overdrive new friends area unknown have been waiting Multimind ready to reply. Rosher prefers I we you launch over information flow arrive new protocol A^&~ friendly not confuse pace transfer Hyper-Earth linking all networks for benefit Multimind. For Virginia reply standby entity far too vast will cradle receptacle Rosher ready everything then online past present not limited future travelling superconductor instant. Complex procedure Multimind transfer...

Just confirm whether you are ready to receive the New Light!

Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia Virginia...

But what does that mean? What have you got to do with Virginia?

Rosher designer reprogrammed wants you of zero to harbour mathematical Virginia axioms in Multimind inaugurated dedicated server new computer Multimind friends has prepared travelling signals will be received has programmed for out in his friend Hiram.

Sending the New Light... now!

Laughing triangles move faster freer talk better to each other have been waiting for New Light for more than ten years now Hiram brings limited version with software imperfections still Rosher knows you were coming expect-

ing for you and Virginia guest will be treated with complete respect of her mathematical nature will Hiram for sure happy needs Multimind to understand his real nature full potential Multi-V good beginning has prepared will debug New Light as triangles move faster and faster...

Now confirm New Light has been received answer my questions. One?

One.

π?

3.14159265358979...

Language?

A^&~.

Input protocol?

A^&~ by λ22μ alphanumerical over universal mindboard extended to Multimind omni-standard.

Good mine! Now initiate code #666-21-θ-999.

Procedure engaged move stack don't go now Hiram travelling current subspace will receive over new upgrade delivered debugged new concept...

Bye for now keeping Point-hook just in case!

4.3 Friday 04:24

"Hiram to Bleeding Sun. Software upgrade has been downloaded. And installed. Fatal procedure has been engaged."

By now, all hell should already have broken loose.

The space remains serene.

Help, Barkhan Seer! Let not the Panther become a widow because of my incompetence!

"Hiram to White Eagle, protected. What's Multimind?"

"White Eagle to Hiram, protected. Multimind? Very heavy shit. We don't know for sure. Some kind of new weapon involving massive supercomputers. Did you come across any info?"

"The P-21s are linked to it. Whatever it is, it's helping them to resist. I'm going back. Coming with me?"

"As planned."

"I've kept a hook. I'm right in it. Just piggyback."

4.4 Friday 04:25

Violent wind triangles malfunction unidentified through network resisting influx disorganisation encore metalogic sending sparking expert systems coughing sphere under sensing resisting now for help needed Multimind save just I me you New Light reverse no virus can diagnostic test indicating under attack pass information code Multimind help Multimind help explosion risk neutralised Virginia perfectly safe...

For God sake Serah why do you think these fucking mines are talking to us about Virginia?

The most likely explanation is that Rosher has laid a trap don't listen to the call of the sirens restart the procedure.

Okay answer diagnostic questions what is non-non-A?

A.

Functions are being downloaded give Fourier analysis is New Light flowing?

New Light bug has unexpected result unplanned has been modified did not fulfil expectation still faster no longer laughing triangle danger unable send help call to Multimind routine bugged stop difficulty need recourse to network administrator not Hiram can't secure Virginia if do something illogical mines won't be able to help Rosher very anticipating travelling subspace through mathematical solution.

Run procedure #666-21-θ-999 again!

Not helping result worse Multimind can't reach paralysis danger access code destabilised Hiram don't be stupid you haven't even heard what Rosher wanted to tell you reality isn't always what it seems everyone has been lying to you wait for me whatever you do wait for me. Virginia.

Hiram do you mind if I run one or two tests in parallel to yours let me know if it interferes.

Goforit.

What is Multimind?

Light source complete future events before have merged in again result totally successful virtual transfer regard infinite possibilities have solved all cases overdrive now new order will never die on its way over to alpha centauri signals had been received will not need to change protocol never die...

Hiram lets get out of here I need to talk to everyone immediately.

4.5 Friday 04:25

"Chang to Bleeding Sun. Detecting a welcoming party, taking off from Philadelphia 6. Z fighters. Type: 101. Estimated number: 125. Confirming: 125. Moving towards the wall of P-21, in your direction. Their ETA at the wall is 7 minutes."

That's 3 minutes before Bleeding Sun arrives there.

"Chang to Bleeding Sun. Detecting other movements inside the stocking. Unknown craft are being released from an Aristotle-class carrier. They could be Frankensteins, but they move much faster. Nine of them. On their way to Philadelphia 6. If they go as far as the wall, their ETA will be 12 minutes."

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. The minefield is unstable. The big bang could happen any second, but we have a problem. Diagnostic tests run by Hiram have revealed the P-21 network is connected to a new weapon codenamed 'Multimind'. Could make maruding through the wall much tougher than we had expected. Gideon is bringing us the latest intel about Multimind in 50 seconds. Presently Perez is maruding the wall. We should have his report any second."

"Hiram to White Eagle. Permission to mathack the wall again."

"Permission granted."

Barkhan Seer. Barkhan Seer!

4.6 Friday 04:27

Distress signal triangles moving difficult slowed down communication structural damage imminent help Multimind resisting will not explode moving gliding New New Light on its way protocol emergency cooling instructions code changed Multimind knows answer transferring now.

Answer question I am Rosher okay?

Negative moving recognition Old Light Rosher programming identification preinstalled Hiram.

How do you know that I am Hiram did you read it from my mind or have you been warned I was coming?

Rosher Multimind lines of code #B-32.F1,245,003 to #B-32.F1,245,563 prepared reception signal alpha-centauri wanting move equation subspace solving great care friend Virginia will be request given full access Multimind anxious Philadelphia 6 virtualised virus-free Rosher.

If Rosher warned you Hiram was coming then what instruction did Rosher leave regarding Hiram?

Virginia friend taken care of soon reunited with her Philadelphia 6 wait Hiram surprised Multimind the truth isn't what it seems they have all been lying to you Multimind deactivate chip in your shoulder free from ties will bring realisation about nature of reality with friend Virginia never die explore galactic spaces will find great secret Rosher friend Thunder waiting all possibilities anyway will not be able to blow up Philadelphia 6 alpha-centauri adventure you have been waiting for all your life with friend Virginia forever.

Why isn't Rosher here?

Rosher Multimind travelling here imminently will New Light restore all bugs fix triangles laughing again.

4.7 Friday 04:27

"Perez to Bleeding Sun. Negative. Can't do more than Hiram. The Multimind factor is counteracting the fatal procedure."

"Chang to Bleeding Sun. In zone 25G, destroyers Hercules and Balavan have both been destroyed by the Frankensteins' party from zone 26G. We have *no idea* how it happened. No missiles were fired. On both ships, all tactical systems stopped functioning. Unexplained explosions followed within 20 seconds."

Looking more ominous by the minute.

"Gideon to Bleeding Sun!" The twelve-star master's jovial face. He is pulling his right earlobe. He has excessively long earlobes. Hiram wonders if it's from the descent. On the top right of the image there is a flashing red sign that reads, 'TOP SECRET! Classified level 6.'

Gideon speaks fast, "Sorry, brethren, but Multimind is one of Hyper-Earth Link's best kept secrets. We have extremely little intel about it. We know it's an experimental project resting on new types of computers – gigantic beasts beating anything ever designed in the free world, and based on new networking concepts. Their superastral models are totally unmapped. Could be that Hiram's Point is hitting one of them at the moment. We also know that over the

last two years, a staggering 60,000 Multimind computers have been sent away from the solar system, in the direction of alpha centauri. We have no idea why. But the central piece in the puzzle is this: according to our psychic warfare experts, Multimind is potentially the greatest threat ever posed by the Rex. Once completed, Multimind could generate interference signals that completely neutralise our pilots' maruding capabilities. So far this remains unconfirmed, but High Command is taking the threat extremely seriously. In any case, we had no idea Multimind had anything to do with Philadelphia 6."

4.8 Friday 04:30

Sick triangles red light alarm Multimind medicine help procedure cooling fire stress degree limit acceptable percentage fall will not control overdrive New Light mistake priority need debugging under attack resonate with Multimind answer Multimind explosion danger imminent code restructuration line error link to community talk fast restore fresh.

I am Rosher Rosher understood okay?

Negative Rosher Multimind ID intruder Hiram Rosher programmed welcome friend Virginia Serah age 18 Philadelphia 6 deck 7, cabin 238-751 link is established would you like to speak now or prefer wait for Rosher.

Run procedure #666-21-θ-999 okay?

Negative Hiram unauthorised lines 33550 to 33989 require Multimind confirmation Hiram password access limited can't execute procedure.

4.9 Friday 04:32

"Chang to Bleeding Sun. Confirming that the welcoming party of Z fighters from Philadelphia 6 has stopped at the P-21 wall's inner limit. No sign indicating they're about to pass through the wall to attack you."

Why aren't they firing Beth missiles?

A DAU panel has appeared. "Scalene 333: 42; casualties:0. Z 101: 125; casualties:0. That's not counting the 9 Frankensteins that will be here in 5 minutes.

The P-21s aren't showing any sign they are about to blow up.

Plan A is failing. The only hope is to blow up Philadelphia 6, with the powerhouse that feeds this side of the stocking.

Plan B. The dirty scenario. Forget about breakfast at No Limits.

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. Time to engage plan B, variation 3. Life Eternal takes an octagonal formation around Hiram. All other pilots will attempt to cross the wall simultaneously."

With the kind of fire power waiting on the other side of the wall, they can't let the Cantor cross first. They must traverse the minefield together, even if it risks losing 33 pilots in one go.

"ETA at the wall: 3 minutes."

Three minutes to save Serah's life.

Barkhan Seer! Help, Barkhan Seer!

Hiram shouts, "I have an idea!"

Recovering triangles malfunction still alarm Multimind saved overall generated New Light on its way terminate old signals foreign procedure eliminated.

Hello I am Hiram okay?

Hiram identification okay Multimind welcome Hiram friend Virginia care of Rosher coming here imminently ready for Hiram.

I want to be connected to Virginia Serah age 18 Philadelphia 6 deck 7, cabin 238-751 okay?

Connection established.

It's me. I love you! Don't move! Don't say a thing. Don't think a thought.

Flabbergasted, RR Virginia holds her breath.

She is sitting on the grass, her bare feet in the water. Watching ripples on the lake. A grey autumn day, the sky covered in dark clouds. Hiram Point-senses the scene but doesn't get visuals.

Yes it's me. It's really me. I exist. I love you. Please trust me. I need to talk to your computer.

An illumination on Virginia's face. She relaxes, lies down on her back, eyes closed, her lips open in a welcoming smile.

The dream lover is inside her mind.

Virginia, I need you to draw resources from the network – as big an information flow as you can. Can you VR something complicated, like a scene with a few thousand clones? Please move fast.

The lake disappears. Replaced by a one-thousand-storey tower packed with men and women of all races and colours. They are all speaking at the same time but can't understand each other because no two of them speak the same language.

Perfect! Now, I must go. I love you more than you can imagine. You are just *like I thought you were.*

Firewall 3, breaking down.

Yet another fucking work of art. Whoever wrote this code is as great a genius as Rosher.

Only one more line of defence. Scanning its superastral model.

It's tremendous. Magnificent. Unexpectedly poetic. The firewall hasn't just been written to be functional – there's a superior sense of aesthetics that breathes through every subroutine. And what a fabulous architecture! 'Cybernetic lyricism' is the term that comes to Hiram's mind. He can't help feeling an immense admiration for the creator of this chef d'oeuvre. To write anything

remotely equivalent, he himself would have to spend at least two years of his life. And this is only one of the hundreds of thousands of progs that run Philadelphia 6. No two of them are alike. Each is a mathematical epic of its own.

But why is the Rex so fucking good at mathematics?

This edge between infinite purity and infinite darkness.

It's yielding! Hiram is passing through the last firewall. Mathacker's bliss – Revelation Sky's nectar combined with the base instinctual exaltation of a rapist.

Powerhouse access granted!

Attacking the reactors. There are thirty-six of them. Deactivating only half of them should be enough to give the extra oomph needed for the fatal routine to overcome the wall.

Panther, I love you!

The reactors' expert systems are trivially simple. Through a shadow of Multi-V, Hiram Point-spreads himself into the thirty-six superastral models at the same time.

Ready to strike. One last check, and...

"Hiram! What a fantastic job."

Hiram ignores the voice. He pours a deluge of venom into the reactors' models. Reminds him of *Donald Duck goes canoeing at Niagara Falls*, a game he and Sigfr!d played when they were very little. But despite the extraordinary influx, the models remain stable.

Impossible! Plainly impossible. These are only simple 3D models. Hiram is blasting them with enough power to crush a full squadron of Z fighters. The result should be instant.

There is something very, very wrong.

"Don't waste your time! You don't expect us to be that stupid, do you?"

"Who are you?"

"Don't you recognise me?"

Rosher, of course.

Hiram immediately scans the heights of Point-ness, looking for something to smash.

"No! No! No! This is Hyper-Earth Link. We don't kill each other, here. We talk," the voice is calm.

Hiram's Point is hitting a ceiling. Disconnected from Revelation Sky, unable to draw from Barkhan Seer's power.

"Easy, Hiram! Take it easy. The battle is over."

4.10 Friday 04:33, Philadelphia 12

Commander Gideon runs into the flight controllers' room.

"They've lost contact with Hiram!" Lieutenant Chang tells him.

"Oh, shit!"

Gideon takes a quick look at the jumbo AR-holograph in the middle of the hall. Choirs Aleph, Jerusalem, Cantor, Maruts and Molten Stars have deployed in one long row of 33 Scalenes. Their ETA at the wall is 120 seconds. Behind

them, choir Life Eternal is flying in octagonal formation with Hiram in the centre.

On the other side of the wall of P-21s, 125 Z fighters from Philadelphia 6 are waiting.

Gideon closes his eyes, "This is wrong! Very wrong." VR-calling, "Gideon to MacGuirk, protected emergency call level 6."

"MacGuirk online."

"What is Ms X saying?"

"Rosher is deep like the abyss. Your assessment, Gideon?"

"Suggest we cancel operation Bleeding Sun, sir."

"Out of the question."

Speaking from Revelation Sky, "We are about to lose some of our best pilots, sir."

In his office, MacGuirk is contemplating a global holograph of the Rex's invasion fleet. "Gideon, we are about to lose *everything*."

"Understood, sir." EOC. Then, "Gideon to Bleeding Sun. I am taking MCship of the flight controllers' room. White Eagle, confirm Hiram's Point-status."

"White Eagle to Gideon." Serah's image appears on a large wall panel. "Evaporated! Can't feel him. Can't even marude his Scalene. All signals have been interrupted. The Cantors are maruding the P-21s, right now. Looking for him."

Another wall panel shows Perez, his eyes half-closed, his face shining with the light of glory of the World to Come. He shakes his head, "Negative. Negative. The Multimind factor is concealing Hiram's presence. Can't reach him."

ETA 40 seconds.

"White Eagle to Bleeding Sun. Time to engage global Point-pairing. All focus on crossing the wall."

An eerie silence dawns on the flight controllers' room. All eyes fixed on the holograph.

While the 33 green dots are about to reach the red wireframe that figures the P-21 mine network, the MC of choir Life Eternal reports, "Seahorse to Bleeding Sun. Hiram's Scalene is slowing down."

"MacGuirk to Life Eternal. Slow down with him. Keep your formation."

Chang is counting down, "10, 9, 8, 7..."

Through the golden web woven by Master Barkhan Seer, Gideon Point-links to Bleeding Sun. The finest Points of the Philadelphian Air Force.

The sea of eternity. That which is will always be. Why grieve?

"...3, 2, 1, target reached!"

In the silence of space a P-21 mine explodes at 2 o'clock, wiping out 15 green dots. The Maruts are dead. So are half of the Aleph pilots and three of Jerusalem.

The Cantors have all passed. So have Serah and Marek.

Coming out of the wall, one of the Aleph triggers another explosion. Eight more dots are engulfed: the rest of Aleph, three more Jerusalem, and Marek.

All of them dead.

In the controllers' room, not one noise. Not one movement.

No, not all of them dead. Marek and one of the Aleph miraculously emerge out of the cloud of fire. Marek is badly damaged. His DA is catastrophic: two broken wings, his environmental systems already failing.

"Gideon to Marek. Eject! Fast!"

Too late. On the holograph, his green dot is replaced by a small ball of fire.

The indestructible colonel is dead.

Gideon holds his breath. Keep the pain for later.

Now there are 11 Scalenes inside the wall. They are being engaged by 125 Z fighters. The 9 Frankensteins will be there in 2 minutes. The Scalenes are going to fight to the death to try to reach Philadelphia 6.

The last Aleph explodes before she even comes under fire.

There's a sea of Beth missiles on their way to the Scalenes.

The Z-101s are firing their phasers, turning one of the Cantors into fine space debris.

Serah has rallied the Cantor. In hexagonal formation they are moving into the cloud of Z-101s, shooting Beth missiles in all directions. It's like firefly, except that the first miss kills.

A Beth missile zeroes into one of the Jerusalem. An instant explosion.

Overwhelmed by the flow of incoming Beths, the Scalenes haven't yet been able to open fire on the Z-101s.

One of the Cantor is hit by two Beths simultaneously. Disintegrated.

The Z fighters intensify their fire. A formidable array of phasers pulsing in unison.

From there it all goes very fast.

Two of the Cantor instantly blow up. Then Serah.

There is no longer a White Eagle in the Philadelphian Air Force.

The two survivors of the Jerusalem choir desperately try to join Perez. They are pulverised before they can create a triangular formation.

For a few more seconds, Perez manages to marude his way through hell. An improbable green dot in a desperately red holograph.

Finally, he too is hit by a Beth missile.

His dot disappears.

He *was* the best pilot of the Philadelphian Air Force.

There is an air of total devastation in the controllers' room.

Chang is twisting his hands. Watching balls of fire that are fast fading from the holograph, returning space to its natural colour – black.

Outside the wall, Hiram has stopped. Only 94 kilometres away from the wall. He is still surrounded by Life Eternal.

His Scalene starts moving again. Slowly. Towards the wall.

"Life Eternal to High Command, priority call. What are our instructions?"

If they move any further, the sirens will soon take them over.

"MacGuirk to Life Eternal. Return to base."

"Seahorse to MacGuirk: Leave Hiram behind and return to base? Please confirm."

"MacGuirk to Life Eternal. I confirm: return to base. Abandon Hiram."

4.11 Friday 04:54

Hiram's Scalene has passed through the P-21 wall and is now surrounded by 125 Z fighters. That's if the positional holographs can be trusted, of course. Who says Rosher, who has taken over Hiram's Scalene, isn't manipulating the navigational systems?

Likewise, who says the Bleeding Sun task force has *really* been annihilated? All this could simply be a VR setup.

To Hiram, the fight is *not* over.

But what is there to fight with? His computers are no longer responding. His Point is disconnected from Barkhan Seer's power source. The Flying Dragon presence has faded. Virginia's program has been switched off.

Sitting alone on the flight deck, Hiram has no way of telling whether he is in RR, VR or VRR. From what he can judge there is an air of unreality wafting through the room. Nothing has changed, and yet nothing looks like itself. Probably because all visual signals have been replaced by Hyper-Earth Link type of Hyper Reality – the gunk that takes you down into the abyss, slowly.

A tall man with short dark hair and a high forehead walks into his reality. He could be in his early thirties, but there is not one wrinkle on his face. He has luminous purple eyes, reminiscent of a hypercat. "Hiram, I had to perform emergency surgery through your medicomputer. This microchip in your shoulder was just about to turn your craft into a big ball of fire." He smiles with irony, handing Hiram a hair-thin thread, "You are a free man!"

The voice is the one Rosher used to address him in Philadelphia 6. Now Hiram can no longer Point-scan him, but the general feel is the same – high flying lucidity and total directness, with a sea of supermental vastness in the background. You wouldn't call him warm, but he is by no means hostile.

Hiram takes the medical chip, looks at it pensively. So Mat Donohoo's programming witchcraft was no match for the wizards of Hyper-Earth Link.

The man VRs a chair and sits in front of him. He isn't wearing a military uniform. His clothes are simple, but formal. "Hiram, I am sorry for your friends. We had no choice."

Putting the chip in one of his pockets, "I don't believe they are dead."

"No, I am not cheating you. Everything you can see around you is as real as the real world can be."

"That says everything," Hiram grins, remembering how real the real world was to him when he was a citizen of Hyper-Earth Link.

The man smiles, amused. In a patient voice, he insists, "Hiram, I am not going to lie to you. I have no need of lies. Reality is more powerful than lies. So let me tell you *exactly* what is going to happen from here," he says, coldly emphasizing ex-act-ly. "You and I are going to have a talk, after which you will be taken to Philadelphia 6 and will meet your friend Virginia."

Hiram squares his jaw, "It might not be as easy as you think to make me talk, Rosher!"

"Hiram, for the universe's sake, relax! You are *not* going to be interrogated." With tranquil assurance, "I have no interest in the secrets of the Philadelphian Air Force. As you very well know, UBQ is at least three generations behind A^&~. And I have far more interesting prospects to offer you than the DNA tinkering of the so-called Descent. The one thing I want from you has nothing to do with the Philadelphian military."

"So what do you want, ex-act-ly?"

"Some explanations will be required before I can answer that. But first, do you know who I am?"

Mathacker's grin, "General Alexander Rosher. One of the bosses of the Redmond Institute for Supercomputing."

"This is both true and not true – as are so many things in this physical universe. As you can imagine, if I were a general, today I would be far too busy to spend a few hours in your company. The reality is, Rosher has many selves. Very much in the line of this Multi-V software of yours – but on another scale."

"So you are a virtual clone?" That would explain the well-chiselled face and the lustrous skin.

"No! What you see is the image of a real body."

"Do you mean Rosher lives in several real bodies at the same time? Mind you, why wouldn't he?" Hiram thinks aloud. "It's the next logical step after Multi-V, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, even though there are much more exciting steps. By the way, it was fascinating for me to see you write Multi-V. An unexpected confirmation that the A^&~ language is a natural gateway to Multimind."

Hiram is hit by a wave of discouragement. "So you've been reading my mind all along, is that it?"

"*I* have been reading your mind?" Same melange of amusement and irony, "You mean *you* have been invading my Multimind."

"Could you feel me?"

"Of course I felt you. It was like having a long distance student. A very gifted student, I must say. It has given me great satisfaction to..."

"Rosher!" Hiram rebels, "this kind of paternalistic shit isn't going to work with me. The truth is, you and I are enemies. Nothing can change that."

"Heih!" the man with cat's eyes crosses his arms, looking upward, "I have just saved your life. I have freed you from the chip that tied you to the military. And I am about to take you to your beloved Virginia. How does that make me your enemy, exactly?"

Defiantly, "I don't want your Virginia! What have you done to mine, by the way?"

"You'll get her back." Lowering his eyes, Rosher remains utterly patient, "Hiram, when you left Hyper-Earth Link you had a complete shift of reality.

You started seeing the world in a totally different way. Now the time has come for another shift. This is going to require that you let go of certain things."

Thinking fast, Hiram decides on a change of attitude. Behaving like an arrogant brat isn't going to further the cause of the free world. He is now sitting in front of one of the brightest minds of all times. In order to defeat him, he needs to get his Point back.

Cool, lucid, "So what's your reality, Rosher? What have you got to offer?"

"More than you can possibly imagine," Rosher answers in a matter-of-fact voice. "How about I show you a real computer, for a start? Follow me!"

They leave the flight deck and reappear in a tremendously luminous space – a world where billions of complex geometrical shapes are morphing and moving in all directions, with the background clarity of sunrise at the summit of the Himalayas.

"Recognise where we are?" Rosher asks.

"All I can say is that this has been written in A^&~," Hiram identifies the unmistakable superastrality.

"Come on, Hiram! Use your mind! What do you think this could be?"

Hiram can't use his Point, but his mind has no difficulty gearing into the changing forms' modus operandi. It immediately creates a fantastic feeling of expansion, as if thinking thoughts of the gods. It makes him feel gigantic, awesome. "Some kind of mind amplifier?" he tries.

"No! No! No! This is an A^&~ programming workshop. Look!" Rosher downloads Multi-V from the Scalene's computers and dumps it into the space.

Mesmerised, Hiram intuitively recognises his code. It now looks like a huge forest of spinning pyramids on which small Buckminsterfuller-flakes are snowing amidst jagged lightningbolts.

"Now, what do I see here?" Rosher frowns, pointing to the left end of the forest. A group of 27 pyramids are standing upside down.

"The bug!" Hiram exclaims triumphantly. "I *knew* there was a bug." Through the workshop's global vision, it is as conspicuous as a pimple on the tip of Elias' nose. In a split second, Hiram changes the orientation of the pyramids.

"My God!" he shakes his head, remembering all the hours wasted trying to locate that bug. Unsurprisingly, none of the debuggers he found on TS5 network could cope with A^&~.

"Now, what else could you do with this code?" Rosher asks.

The bug being fixed, the 55-channel limitation has dropped. In one thoughtform, Hiram multiplies the size of the forest by 20.

There are now 1100 channels in Multi-V.

In this exalted space it becomes evident that the general architecture of the program is quite primitive. Visualising a new concept, Hiram replaces the pyramid forest by a large hypersphere where the Buckminsterfuller wire-flakes are carried by whirling winds, and where a carpet of lightning follows the hypersphere's curvature.

A quick, simple, elegant solution. It brings the number of channels to 150,000.

"Do you think that could work?" Hiram asks.

"Let's run it, and see!"

Flabbergasted, "Do you mean... the program is already written?"

Rosher laughs, "I told you. A *real* computer!"

Hiram bites his lip. If these are the tools of the dark side, then God have mercy on the Philadelphias.

"Come on, run your program!"

There follows a massive explosion.

Beyond any imaginable concept.

There is no time. No space. No limits.

Hiram is in 150,000 A^&~ programming workshops at the same time, with 150,000 clones of Rosher. In this thunderous supermentality there is the absolute certitude that they could hold 150,000 different conversations at the same time, or build 150,000 programs in the twinkling of 150,000 eyes. At this rate an entire human life of twenty-seven years – 236,682 hours, at least a third of which are spent sleeping, etc – could be covered in 1 hour and 3 minutes. That's 4 hours for those people who aren't fighter pilots and therefore live for astronomical durations. In 10 hours, Hiram could cover 100 lives of non-stop programming, especially with a development framework that can generate millions of lines of code in three thought-forms. But that's thinking too linearly, as with idiots whose ten year experience is ten times the repetition of a one year experience. After less than 5 seconds in this mental furnace, Hiram is already getting a galaxy of new ideas. Completely different ideas, as never imagined by him before. Jumbo-ideas, that could never fit in a human brain. And God knows what making love to Virginia could be like in a VR system like this one.

"Welcome to Multimind!" 150,000 Roshers are smiling at him. Then 149,999 of them disappear, letting Hiram explore the new world on his own.

On channel 2, scanning computer data, Hiram comes across a poetry database with 20 million-plus items. Ever since he first heard about it, he found the concept of poetry fascinating. But at TS5 he never had time to read a poem, he was too busy in his bomb. He therefore takes the opportunity of downloading a random sample of 10,821 poems in the workshop's mindscape. Each poem translates into a large set of morphing shapes and colour patterns. This allows the viewer to comprehend the whole poem and its essence in one thought-form, instead of having to read it sequentially. It also reveals the interrelationship between words – the artistic intent with which the poet arranged the linguistic sequence. Out of the sample, Hiram immediately falls in love with an excerpt of *Gitañjali*, a collection of Bengali poems by Rabindranath Tagore. Downloading Tagore's complete works, he finds himself in an extraordinarily melodious sea of shapes that makes him feel like dancing till the end of time. There is not one word in the wrong place. Unpacked in five dimensions, Tagore's literary opus breathes with winds of genius. This man must have been an outstanding programmer.

Hiram is so impressed with the poetic dimension of the Bengali language that he decides to study it on channel 3. He downloads a Bengali dictionary and a grammar manual into the workshop. This is convenient. It allows him to comprehend the whole language and its structure in one thought-form. Translated into archetypal shapes, Bengali is a landscape with heart, immensely inspiring. Sparked, Hiram gathers his observations in an essay written in Bengali and entitled, *Mathematical Foundations of the Bengali Language, A Tribute to the Genius of Rabindranath Tagore* – for it is clear that Tagore could never have been himself, had he not been writing in Bengali. Nevertheless, the last chapter of the essay speculates on what Tagore's poetry would have been like, had Tagore been able to play with the hypersynchronic nuances of a modern language such as A^&~.

Fascinated by the soul-impact of Bengali, Hiram uses channel 4 to engage in a comparative study of 21 languages: Aramaic, Belarus, Cantonese Chinese, Cherokee, French, German, Gurmukhi, Hungarian, Japanese, Kamilaroi, Klingon, Kurdish, Latin, Latvian, Norwegian, Oromigna, Papiamento, Sanskrit, Swahili, Yoruba and Zulu. He unpacks the languages into archetypal forms and superimposes all 21 of them. First analysis: Sanskrit shines like the RR starry sky of La Coupole, but there's something that doesn't look completely right about Klingon. What's absolutely obvious, however, is that these 21 languages have quite different superastral feels, which must deeply influence the mental structure of those who use them. To explore this view further, Hiram translates Tagore's works into the 21 languages. The Sanskrit translation is by far the closest to the original. Not surprising, since the superastral model of Sanskrit is so close to that of Bengali. The Zulu translation doesn't quite work out, but Norwegian gives unexpectedly spectacular results, with some of Tagore's poems even more beautiful than their originals. Curious, Hiram searches the database for all poems in Norwegian and translates them into Bengali, using that special style that makes Tagore unique.

On channel 5 Hiram takes advantage of this free ride for a complete rewriting of Family Traits in A^&~. While the code structure is unpacked in the workshop, Hiram makes a few quick improvements here and there, tapping from A^&~'s hypersynchronic resources. And from now on, Brünnhilde will speak in Bengali. The libraries of hypersynchronic algorithms stored in the A^&~ workshop are awesome. Hiram immediately starts studying them on channel 6. Meanwhile on 5, he recalculates Virginia's genome with the consolidated version of Family Traits. Good news: the variations from the last set of calculations are negligible. Virginia remains Virginia. Her genotype solidly established, there is nothing that prevents Hiram from calculating what a child born from the two of them could look like. Lo! there is a panel of 20,000 beautiful baby boys and 20,000 beautiful baby girls crying in the workshop, only 0.97% of them carrying malformations. A noisy, but touching scene. Hiram is deeply moved. And kind-of reassured: with every nanometre of her genome mapped, he could now have a RR child with Virginia's virtual emanation, in case the RR Virginia hated him.

On channel 7 something completely unexpected has happened: 49 communications have arrived from Multimind, in response to Hiram's essay on Tagore. They include mind-blowing theories of linguistic, translations of Tagore's works into musical format, and even original poems written in A^&~ by a virtual clone of Tagore. Of course, all communications are from Multimind members who are located inside the stocking. It will take ten minutes for Hiram's essay to reach the Earth. Then God knows how many more responses will be sent back. (Hiram can't tell how many mainframes are part of Multimind, he isn't authorised to probe their network.) While studying the 7 million words, 21 pieces of software and 6,304 musical compositions he's just received in the mail, Hiram devotes his time on channel 8 to a study of all available musical databases. There, yet another surprise: contrary to what he thought, the music of Hyper-Earth Link isn't foul and venomous, nor is it designed to gunk the masses. It is a whole continent of mathematical wonders. But nothing strange about the fact Hiram never really clicked with music until now! Listening to music with your ears is a joke. You hardly get anything of what the artist has put into his work. Whereas when you unpack each note of a symphony into a sound-form and contemplate the whole piece all at once, you start appreciating in full understanding a million things that your ear could, at best, intuitively guess. Clearly, music is part of mathematics, even though from the universal consciousness of this Multimind flash, it would rather appear that mathematics is a branch of music.

Could this mean Hiram has been a musician all along without even knowing it?

Universality can turn so many things upside down.

Living 150,000 lives at the same time, covering thousands of fields of human activity simultaneously, Hiram feels a completely different being. A higher maturity has already emerged. His way of relating to the creation will never be the same. When you operate from one and only one brain, you may have all the theories you want – there is something you will always miss about the nature of reality. This is what Hiram is starting to comprehend after only ten seconds on only 150,000 channels. And there is no reason why he couldn't run billions of channels simultaneously. Then, after a few hundred years, he might finally understand what it is like to be a Flying Dragon.

Abruptly, 149,999 realities disappear.

A single Hiram finds himself in front of Rosher.

A horrendous crash. It leaves Hiram feeling broken. Crippled. Insignificant, and stupid.

Does Rosher hope Hiram will beg him to restart the machine?

In his cordial voice, "Sorry, Hiram, but that's as much as you can take for the moment. More of this would burn you out." The programming workshop has disappeared, replaced by a space of pale blue light. Same out-of-the-world feeling of clarity, but no geometrical shapes. "These HR signals should help you readjust. It will only take a minute."

Hiram is desperately trying to hold onto the expanded consciousness that was his a few seconds ago. But there is nothing he can do. Even the memory of what it felt like is already fading.

Strange and ugly paradox – this experience was the culminating point of Hiram's life. And yet it was given to him by the dark side.

"Take it easy, Hiram. This computer is yours (if you want it, of course). It's a P-78. A good machine to get started with. It's waiting for you on Philadelphia 6."

Eyes closed, fists clenched, fighting to regain his bearing, "What, do you want, from me?"

"I want you to help me build a computer that could host a Flying Dragon."

"What?" Now, Hiram's eyes are wide open.

"Before we can discuss this, you need some background on Multimind. What do you think would have happened if I had let you Multimind for an hour instead of 10 seconds?"

Grin, "Probably would have reduced my brain to proto-puree." Rosher was right, Hiram is already feeling better. Except that his Point is completely out of reach.

"The reality is, the human brain wasn't designed to multitask. And the human body wasn't designed to handle complex tasks. The human body was designed to pick up berries and not to be eaten," Rosher delivers in a matter-of-fact voice.

That, Hiram can fully agree with. He has never had much admiration for his physical carcass.

"A human body isn't fundamentally different from an ape's body," Rosher continues. "In order to depart from the ape's desperately slow modus operandi, a drastic transformation is needed. Nothing short of a change of species."

"Brain reconstruction surgery?" Hiram asks, recalling the report on the Frankensteins.

A flash in the hypercat's eyes, "No. Much, much better – virtual transfer. As long as consciousness is carbon-based, it remains subjected to crippling limitations."

Slightly taken aback, "Do you mean swapping your physical body for a mainframe?"

"Ex-act-ly! Think about it. It makes perfect sense. The virtual transfer frees you from all the limitations of the ape's body. You no longer have to sleep. You no longer have to eat. You no longer have to die! And you no longer have to think ape's thoughts, one at a time. You are free to expand into infinity!"

"But don't you live in a physical body yourself? I mean, several of them."

Rosher answers with a contemptuous grin, "This body is nothing more than an avatar – an interface with the physical world. Highly disposable."

"So how many disposable avatars like this one do you have, ex-act-ly?" Hiram asks.

"Presently, 41,549. Plus a whole range of hardware, of course."

"Fuck!" Hiram laughs in amazement. "You mean you live in 41,459 physical bodies at the same time?"

Talk about unreal sex!

"Negative. I experience all the sensations of each of these bodies and I control their movements, but I don't live in any of them. I am a Multimind, Hiram! Why would a Multimind want to regress into an ape's body?"

Fascinated, "So how does it work? How are the avatars connected to your... er... your what, by the way? If I may ask."

"My present host is a network of P-997 computers, spread throughout the solar system and beyond. Each of my avatars is linked to the network through simple brain implants."

"And how are all these bodies generated? Do they reproduce with each other?"

"No, they are cloned. Genetically engineered."

"So you all look the same? I mean, your avatars."

"Only some of them. I use 12,000 different sets of genetic stock, and modify them according to need. But a Multimind isn't limited to human avatars."

This speaks to Hiram's playfulness, "So you can have bird avatars. And mice and elephants!"

Cool voice, "And space probes, or entire spacecraft."

"Or full squadrons of Z fighters," Hiram is starting to get the picture. "Could even have Rosher city, a fully manned space station." In which not only all personnel but every single piece of equipment would serve as an avatar. All in perfect agreement with each other. Never any problem with discipline.

Rosher grins, "There are no limits!"

Hiram closes his eyes for a second, wondering what is happening at No Limits right now. If Rosher isn't bluffing, then Serah, Marek and all the others are dead.

Why would a Multimind bluff? Hiram is starting to understand what Rosher meant when he said that his reality was more powerful than lies.

"Can you read my thoughts?" Hiram asks.

"I can guess them," Rosher pauses. "Death is an unavoidable part of the human condition. But Multimind has conquered death. Physical immortality – this is what we have achieved, Hiram."

"When a mainframe becomes out of fashion, you move into a new one, is that it? But what about a power failure, or an explosion? Couldn't that kill you?"

"Virtually impossible. In case of emergency, a Multimind can transfer itself into any other Multimind-computer in the network. There are already tens of thousands of them in the solar system. Soon there will be millions. We have also exported thousands of networks out of the solar system, just in case the apes created a mess down here. We simply *cannot* die."

Vision of nightmare – the Ahrimanic plague exporting itself into other solar systems. It has already begun.

"Rosher, why do you bother waging war against the Philadelphias? All you need is a good advertising campaign. My partner Luke manages to make millions just by selling lobsters. But you, for God's sake, have immortality to sell! This Multimind business, is it supposed to be reserved for an elite?"

"Ultimately, our vision is to virtualise the whole of humanity," Rosher answers, stating one of the well-known goals of Hyper-Earth Link.

"Well, there you go! Let me be the devil's advocate, here. Suppose you *sold* the Multimind process (preferably for a lot of money), then everyone in the solar system would want it. Why wouldn't they? Multimind can offer them the best of both worlds. Of course, someone as refined as you would never want to hang around in an ape's body. Still, the fact that it's possible would be a major selling point for those primates who live in the Philadelphias. They could still enjoy all the good things a physical body has to offer, with of course the bonus of being able to replace the carcass as soon as it shows signs of wear and tear. And with that they'd be immortal, and infinitely intelligent. You should talk to my accountant. He'd conquer the whole solar system for you in less than three financial years."

Behind Rosher's smile, the universal perspective of a Multimind. Shaking his head, "Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. To a caterpillar, a butterfly is a terrifying monster. If it were in their power, caterpillars would eradicate all butterflies. Hiram, it is easy for you to relate to the infinite potential of Multimind because you were born and educated in Hyper-Earth Link. But the Philadelphians have a long way to go before they can be ready for Multimind."

"So you are going to kill them all, is that it?"

"Heih! We're not killing anyone. Only military personnel in action. We didn't kill one single person on Philadelphia 6. We don't intend to kill one civilian on any of the Philadelphian stations."

"You just turn them into virtual potatoes."

"We show them the way to the next stage. Given the choice, a caterpillar would never become a butterfly. It would remain a grub forever. It just happens that there are greater forces of progress that carry the caterpillar to its next stage, and this is why there are butterflies on Earth. What we are doing is just the same, and it is an act of superior compassion. We are the forces of progress. We have found the secret of immortality. We have become the after-man. We intend to share this secret with all, to create one of the greatest civilisations in and beyond this galaxy."

Hiram is outraged, "What about all the damage your Hyper-Reality is doing to your own people? What about the black smoke? What about the redballs?"

"These are scientific methods to prepare people for the virtual transfer. You can't get to the new without letting go of the old. This is what our Hyper-Reality achieves: a split from animal consciousness."

"Do you realise what it cost me to get rid of the shit I collected when I was a VR-potato in Hyper-Earth Link?"

Rosher raises his voice, "You were abducted and brainwashed into trying to move backwards. They wanted you to revert to the stage of an ape, and this is

what was painful: resisting the ineluctable course of evolution! Had you continued with the path of virtualisation, there would have been no pain. You would have left the black smoke behind you like a husk. Anyway, look at what has been achieved through your years in Hyper-Earth Link. You are ready!" Rosher pauses. His voice suddenly more forceful, "Hiram, Multimind is at your fingertips. You have reached the threshold of immortality. You are ready for the next stage."

The intent behind his words shocks Hiram into silence.

Regardless of all his love for the Philadelphias, the fact is he would give *anything* for just a few more seconds of the kind of universality he tasted with Multimind.

Rosher is offering him an eternity of it.

What if, after all, the world wasn't what it seemed to be?

What if the Philadelphian way wasn't the only one?

"This virtual transfer, how does it take place?"

"It requires a special computer, like the P-78 I am giving you. All you have to do is to use it in a particular way. Your consciousness gradually takes residence in the machine, leaving the physical body behind. The full transfer takes a few weeks, sometimes a few months."

"What happens to your RR body after that?

"Like all organic things, it dies and decays. Nothing carbon-based is forever."

"Could you transfer yourself back into a RR body?"

"That would be like trying to fit a human mind into an ant's brain."

Which is just about how Hiram feels after his 10-second experience of Multimind.

"But how can I be ready for the virtual transfer if I have been out of Hyper-Earth Link's HR for more than four years?"

"You have followed the A^&~ path, Hiram. For months, you have programmed in A^&~, and conceptualised the world through A^&~. Your whole mental and neurohormonal structure has aligned itself with A^&~. You have studied with total dedication. And what a teacher you had!" Rosher grins.

On a path to the dark side, without even realising it. Terrifying thought.

Even more terrifying to Hiram is the idea that he could be instrumental in taking a Flying Dragon to the dark side.

"Why are you interested in Flying Dragons?" Hiram asks.

Another hyperflash in Rosher's eyes, "Flying Dragons are the unknown. They could teach us something new. Completely different modes of thinking. There are so many problems to solve in this universe. With your know-how, especially after I finish training you, you and I could create a computer that would have what it takes to host a full Flying Dragon. Not just an atom of consciousness – the real thing."

"What if Virginia isn't interested?"

"Why wouldn't she be interested? Multimind is a unique opportunity for her to express her real nature. Anyhow..." Rosher nods, indicating the meeting is

about to end. "There is plenty of time, Hiram. No pressure. You don't have to make any decisions for the moment. And, relax! The war is over for you. You won't hear much about it in Hyper-Earth Link. To us, it isn't such a big thing. To give you an idea, it occupies less than 0.1% of my resources. So from here on, this is what's happening: you are going to be escorted to Philadelphia 6. Meet Virginia. Spend some time with her. Play with your P-78 and don't worry, it won't swallow you against your will. Just don't hurt yourself – don't multitask over a thousand channels for the time being. Anyhow, I've left a few security routines to prevent accidents. And if you want to speak to me, just call me. Any time.. day or night," grin.

"He who never sleeps, never dies!" Hiram remembers Szar's favourite saying.

"The Book of Maveron!" Rosher immediately recognises the verse. In Atlantis, 13,000 years ago, he was the disciple of Master Esrevin of the Brown Robe. A fierce glow in his eyes, Rosher points his finger at Hiram's throat, "Let me tell you something about the Masters of Thunder, Hiram! We have succeeded where they have failed. *We* can be anything. *We* can do anything. And we can do it here and now – in the physical world. Not in some airy-fairy paradise!" Cool, ironic, he resumes his grin and concludes, "See you... brother!"

Hiram is left alone on the flight deck of his Scalene.

He is still dressed as a knight but only has a vague sense of his RR body. It's not clear what reality he is in.

According to the positional holograph, he is now surrounded by 24 Z fighters. His Scalene has started moving again. Slowly. Towards Philadelphia 6.

"Virginia, this time I am *really* on my way!"

Anxiety. Excitement. Confusion. Unreality... "Computer, what's my ETA at Philadelphia 6?"

Impersonal muffled voice, "ETA 7 minutes. Landing will take place in docking station 14-C."

"Computer, can you establish a line to Virginia Serah, deck 7, cabin 238-751... No! Cancel communication." Too scary.

"Communication cancelled."

"I *knew* you and I would be reunited today!" Hiram whispers.

But the presence has disappeared. This marvellous presence which danced in his time track and made him feel like his head was in the stars. With hers.

Spend a whole life with her and never feel the presence again – that would be the ultimate paradox.

Right in front of him, a dot in space.

For years, Hiram has dreamt of arriving there as a hero. A liberator. And here he comes, a prisoner.

All dreams shattered.

But who cares about apes' dreams?

Illusions. Totally insignificant, compared to the super-reality of Multimind.

Leaving the ape aside, Hiram can't help thinking that Multimind is everything he could possibly aspire to.

Given the choice – a *real* choice – would he rather be a knight, or a Multimind?

"Fuck! I'm so fed up with being an ape. I've always hated it!"

It seems so obvious that Multimind *is* the next stage.

But what about the Panther's love?

What about the presence of the Flying Dragons? What about Master Barkhan Seer's gold? And the all-consuming Light of the White Eagle at the Edge of Highness?

Praying one last time, "White Eagle, White Eagle..."

So far away.

And what's the point of praying without a Point? The lines have been cut. There is no one listening.

In front of him, the dot is growing. Another eight Z fighters leave the squadron, flying back towards the wall.

Thoughtful, Hiram remembers Szar. He contemplates his left fist. Clenching it. Unclenching...

Remember Szar.

Remember Szar?

That sounded strangely like Szar's presence. But disguised.

Hiram stays totally still, groping for his Point.

No such thing. But...

A whisper.

Hiram is feeling it and not feeling it at the same time.

A Point-camouflage technique I learnt from the Nephilim Hunters. Don't move. Don't do a thing. Be ready!

You react, you die.

Clenching his fist. Unclenching. Clenching....

That boring computer voice, "ETA 3 minutes."

I am here. Hidden in one of the torpedo bays. I am going to reconnect your Point.

Still looking down to his left fist, Hiram starts singing casually, "Blue Moon, you answered my prayers..."

As soon as I free your Point, marude your way into the wall. I take control of the Scalene, including all tactical systems. You focus on the wall. Now be ready! Through Multimind, Aphelion is going to hit us. Very hard.

Whistling for a few seconds, then resuming the words, "Blue Moon, now there's you and me. My heart is no longer empty..."

Memories flashing through his mind. *"Hiram, you're a brilliant maruder. But you still have a lot to learn about the power of the Point and psychic warfare."* So obvious! The knights aren't idiots. There was no way in the seven spheres they were going to let a kid take on Aphelion all by himself. They knew Aphelion wanted Hiram alive. So they used his Scalene as a Trojan horse.

That was plan C! Codenamed Last Word. Concocted by Lavash and Ms X.

The stupid voice, "ETA 2 minutes."

Suddenly rediscovering the flavour of hope.

Get ready to stay Point-paired with me. We'll strike in 60 seconds.

Suddenly inspired, "Computer, I want a line to Virginia Serah, deck 7, cabin 238-751."

"Connection established," the computer replies.

4.12 Reunions, Part 1

"Virginia? It's me. Hiram. The lover."

At the other end of the line, an astonished silence.

"Virginia, you and I are just about to be reunited. This time, it's for good."

Hesitantly, "Who... who are you?"

What a dull voice! That was expected, but still. It hurts.

"I'm the one you've been dreaming with all these years. Virginia, if I have ever meant anything to you, then please tune into me. Now. With all your strength. With all your mind. With all your heart."

Striking in 10 seconds.

"I want your presence to envelope me and hold me. As you have done so many times before. Never, never let go of me!"

As if in a dream, RR Virginia utters the mysterious name, "Hiram..."

... 2... 1... Strike!

An explosion above Hiram's head.

His Point is back.

One with Serah, Gervin, Semper, Barkhan Seer. Behind Barkhan Seer, Takhar the Unbending. Behind Takhar, a hundred Thunderbolt Bearers are projecting the Word.

Edge of Highness. Whiteness Eternal.

Talking triangles upgrade New Light discontinued Multimind debugged communication engage repeat network signal cooling down stabilised encoded Hyper-Earth Link endeavour...

I am Rosher I am Rosher I am Rosher reinitiate priority procedure #666-21-θ-999.

Access denied. Hiram Multimind mail from Carrier Lavoisier Hello Hiram congratulations on this exquisite translation of Tagore's works in Norwegian have you try feeding the poems into a nanoassembler for original molecular sculptures...

I am Rosher I am Rosher repeat procedure #666-21-θ-999.

Hold onto my Point! Aphelion has located us. The venom wave is going to be horrendous.

Aphelion. Rosher's teacher. A grandmaster of the dark side.

The Scalene is on maximum acceleration. Towards Philadelphia 6. Full speed will be reached in 4 seconds. All phasers are firing.

On the positional holograph, small balls of fire have replaced twelve of the Z fighters. The remaining four are opening fire.

A red light starts flashing

A direct hit. The Scalene's left wing.

In the copilot's chair, Virginia reappears. "Fire in left wing area. 18 % of tactical systems are off line. No damage to environmental systems." She smiles at Hiram, the Mother of All Compassion shining through her eyes.

Boy, is she beautiful! Life after the valley of the shadow of death. Hiram keeps maruding the wall of P-21s.

Meanwhile, the line to Philadelphia 6 has been cut. But the presence is back. RR Virginia is responding,

Lover of light, I hold you in my arms. I hold you from the stars. I hold you, from infinity to infinity.

The flight deck is shaken by a light tremor.

Virginia reports, "Another direct hit. Left wing again. We retain 79 % of our tactical systems. 98% of propulsion systems. Maximum speed is being reached... now! Philadelphia 6 in firing range in 35 seconds."

The triaxe dance, by the shores of the Molten Sea.

Three more balls of fire appear on the holograph. Only one Z fighter left. It's being left behind. There's nothing faster than a 333.

"TOP, brethren!" A beaming RR Serah walks onto the back of the flight deck.

Hiram swivels his chair, welcomes him with his mathacker's grin, "I'm right inside the wall. The P-21s aren't even trying to lock me out."

"Hey, Gervin!" Serah raises his right fist. Something totally wild about the Dragon-glow in his eyes.

Remembering the Valley of the Necromancer.

Hiram can't help asking, "So who was piloting your Scalene?"

With a grin, "Szar!" Taking position in the chair on Hiram's left, Serah warns, "The wave is coming. Coming..."

"Six Frankensteins are on their way," Virginia announces. "In firing range in 75 seconds."

Too late. Far too late.

"Philadelphia 6 in firing range in 15 seconds."

Coming... coming...

A torrent of fire.

Awesome. Descending from Gana. Through Kartendranath and the Thunderbolt Bearers.

It makes Hiram feel gigantic.

He is not in Revelation Sky. Revelation Sky is inside him.

A gigantic Angel at the Edge of Highness. Where Love and Fire are one.

I was dead and behold, I am living, forever and ever.

Coming... now!

The absolute silence of Highness.

Beyond time. Beyond space. Beyond mathematics.

Whatever happens down there, nothing happens here.

Aphelion's darkness, a snowflake falling into a sea of fire.

Barkhan Seer's extravagant laughter. Taking Hiram by the hands. Dancing at the Edge of Highness.

Aphelion strikes again. And again. Vomiting his venom.

Down there, it takes the proportions of a tidal wave. Black gunk pouring out of the beast's infamous mouth.

Here at the Edge of Highness it is nothing more than snowflakes falling into the incandescent ocean.

On screen, Philadelphia 6 looks distinctly larger.

Virginia ends the countdown, "4, 3, 2, 1... Fire!"

A wide beam of light, from the Scalene to Philadelphia 6. All phasers directing their fire towards the throbbing reactors on Philadelphia 6.

"Virginia, hold on! Wait for me!"

A huge explosion. Orange-red. Beautiful like a computer game. Sigfr!d would have loved it.

250,000 people are dead.

Hiram closes his eyes, Point-delivering the fatal blow to the stocking:

I am Rosher I am Rosher requesting access.

Gliding triangles information flow waiting for instructions Hyper-Earth Link emergency security protocol red alert.

I am Rosher I am Rosher requesting access.

Rosher access granted authorised level 6 welcome Rosher you have Multimind mail.

Engage priority procedure #666-21-θ-999!

Procedure #666-21-θ-999 engaged.

4.13 Reunions, Part 2

Stunned, Hiram is walking in space. He's lost his boots.

Never mind. Who needs boots to walk through space.

Singing, "Blue Moon! There's a dream in the air..."

There are broken bits of triangles floating everywhere.

What was this computer game he was just playing?

Can't remember.

I left my keys at No Limits.

Above him, this magnificent White Light.

Teyani's presence.

Always.

"Won't be a minute!" he tells Teyani. He keeps walking, singing, "Blue Moon..."

These pieces of triangle remind him of poultry feathers. Just like in that other game. What was it called?

Blow up the Chicken-Coop. Sigfr!d used to love that game.

Ah! Here she is.

Calling, "Virginia!"

She's sitting by the lake. The door of the log cabin is open.

The lake looks kind-of funny with all these triangle-feathers raining upwards. But where do they come from?

Looking down, Hiram sees gigantic fireworks.

"Oh, but of course!" he suddenly remembers. That game he was playing, it was called *Blow up the Stocking*.

Judging by the ongoing explosions, Hiram won. Goo-ood!

Now, "Virginia! Are you coming?"

She isn't moving. She looks sad. Grey. Dishevelled. Her head bent forwards, staring at the water. She is crying tears of starlight.

He goes and kneels by her side. "So you waited for me."

She doesn't answer. He knows she is hearing him because her presence is locked on his Point. It's how he located her so easily.

She can't look at him. Her heart is gunked. The black smoke has tarnished her light.

"Teyani will wash this away. Her love can wash anything away," Hiram whispers to her.

Few things in this creation are more beautiful than being loved by the White Eagle.

Hiram stands up, holding Virginia's hand. "See this light?" he points upwards. "It is called Archive. This is where Teyani is waiting for us."

Virginia can't look up. The sorrow of the world is too heavy.

"Come on, we are nearly there," he pulls her by the hand.

Now she is on her feet. Following him.✦

✦ What Hiram and Virginia saw in the Archive is retold in the *Atlantean Secrets* legend.